The New Criterion

April 1987

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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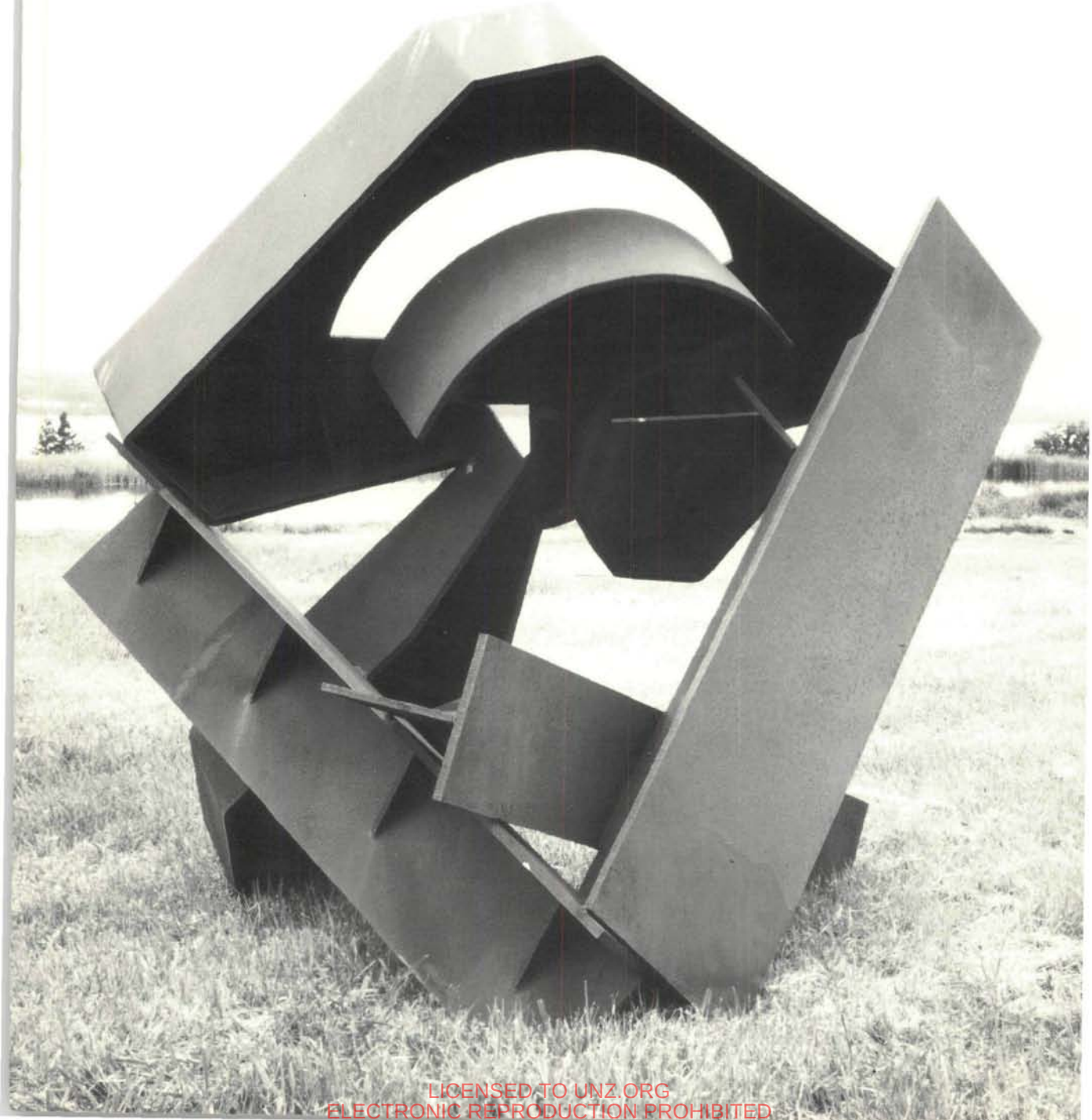

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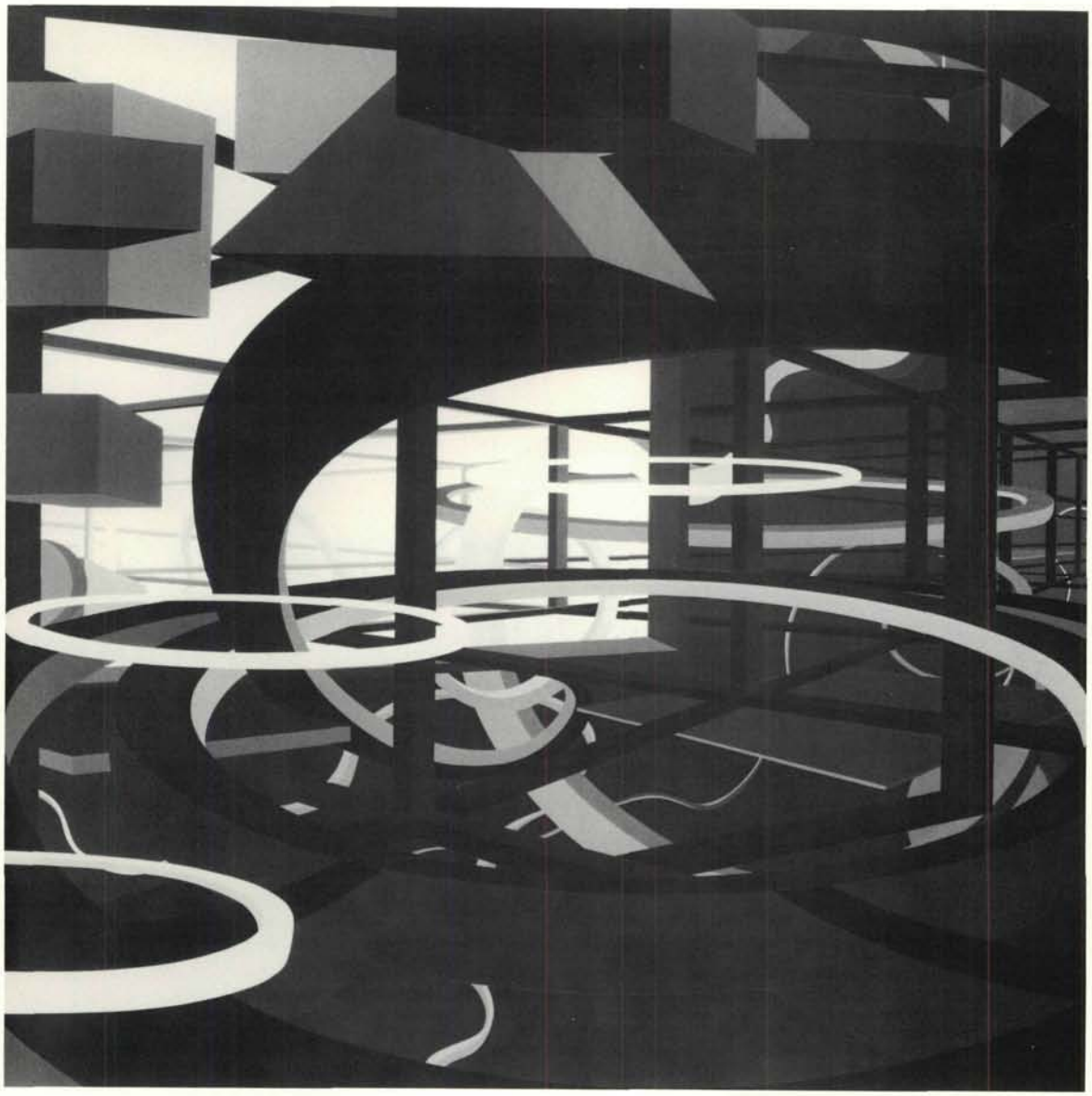

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On the "Spiritual in Art" in Los Angeles

by Hilton Kramer

The exhibition called "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985," which Maurice Tuchman has organized with the assistance of Judi Freeman at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is the kind of event that illuminates a good deal more than its ostensible theme.[1] The theme itself—the role played by certain occult or spiritualist doctrines in the creation of abstract painting from its origins to the present day—is an important one, and in recent years we have had ample opportunity to become better acquainted with it as more and more scholars have explored the often arcane ideas which are believed to have exerted a considerable influence on the aesthetics of abstraction. About the early history of abstract painting, anyway, these unquestionably have much to tell us. Moreover, the need for an exhibition that would attempt to bring our increased knowledge of the philosophical sources of abstract painting into alignment with our experience of the art itself has long been recognized. This, indeed, is the show which the "Spiritual in Art" was designed to give us. And while the result, I think, is a deeply flawed exhibition, its organizers are nonetheless to be commended for undertaking a difficult task and implementing it with the sort of wide-ranging research the subject requires. Certainly, as an historical inquiry into the origins of abstract art and the ideas which are now known to have governed its creation, the "Spiritual in Art" show marks a turning point.

Yet it would be idle to pretend that it is only as an historical inquiry that this exhibition makes its appeal. The issues raised by the "Spiritual in Art" address themselves directly to current debate about art and its interpretation. For while we are being invited on this occasion to make some far-reaching revisions in our understanding of abstract painting, we are also being urged to recast our conception of modern art itself—and beyond this, to ponder the crisis which has lately overtaken the very idea of abstract art for a great many people who have heretofore believed it to represent the culmination of the modernist movement in art. About this latter issue, the organizers of the exhibition are understandably discreet. The intellectual etiquette of the curatorial profession discourages open confrontation in such matters. But the issue is very much there, all the same, and its nagging presence reminds us that exhibitions like the "Spiritual in Art" tend as a rule *not* to be initiated when the art under review (in this case, abstract painting) is widely seen to be enjoying a period of

1 "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985," organized by Maurice Tuchman with the assistance of Judi Freeman, was shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from November 23, 1986 to March 8, 1987. It will be on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago from April 17 to July 19, and at the Haags Gemeentemuseum in The Hague from September 1 to November 22.

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vitality and growth, but, on the contrary, that they can usually be expected to make their appearance when something about the art seems diminished and problematic.

If this is in fact the case—and the publication this season of Frank Stella's *Working Space,* with its sweeping attack on contemporary abstraction, is but one of several recent developments that re-enforce the sense of crisis I speak of—then an event like the "Spiritual in Art" inevitably acquires a certain polemical character. The immediate purpose of the show may be to document an important chapter in the history of abstract painting, but the show itself will also be seen to constitute a kind of inquest into the loss of something once deemed vital to the art—namely, its "meaning." Thus, to the extent that the "Spiritual in Art" is taken to be an inquiry into what Mr. Tuchman calls the "hidden meanings" of abstract painting, it will be enthusiastically welcomed by those who have long had reason to believe that abstraction—and indeed all of modern art—is, or should be, "about" something other than itself. Which is another way of saying that the "Spiritual in Art" is yet another assault mounted against what is variously described as the "formalist" or "modernist" reading of the art of the modern era—a reading that gives to the *aesthetic* aspect of art a radical priority over its subject matter or content. At stake in this debate is not only the role to be ascribed to "ideas" in the creation of art, but the very status (if any) which the aesthetic factor is to be accorded in our account of what a work of art *is.*

My own view of this issue is, alas, a deeply divided one. On the one hand, I am not myself satisfied that a formalist reading of a work of art can ever wholly account for either our experience of it or the complexity of the impulses that have entered into its creation. On the other hand, I know very well that the many critics and scholars who now feel at liberty to offer fanciful "interpretations" of art—modern art included—are mostly talking nonsense or something worse than nonsense, something that seriously misrepresents the nature of art itself. The only thing one can be absolutely certain of in this matter is that the temptation to smuggle their own "meanings" into a work of art and then ascribe this intellectual contraband to the artist is one that writers in this field now find it all but impossible to resist. The nature and quality of contraband vary, of course. The smuggled goods may be political or sexual—the traffic in these is especially heavy just now—or they may be the result of the kind of academic research that eagerly seeks out sundry "affinities," parallels, causes, and connections, which, when we look into them, turn out to be either entirely irrelevant to the art in question or entirely imaginary or both. Whatever the origin of this intellectual contraband, the role it plays in the interpretation of modern art is now so rampant and so promiscuous that the art itself is in danger of being rendered invisible. However limited the so-called formalist reading of modern art may be, it at least has the virtue of putting us in touch with those elements in a work of art which can actually be seen and experienced. The same can rarely be said for the readings offered by its freewheeling opponents.

The really vexing thing about the "Spiritual in Art" exhibition is that it seizes upon a genuinely important issue in the interpretation of abstract painting and then, having duly established its direct relevance to the work of the founding fathers of abstraction, so distends and distorts its application to so many other artists of so many different persuasions that the original point of the inquiry tends to get hopelessly muddled—lost, in fact, in the mists of idle speculation, false claims, and arbitrary interpretation. This is an unhappy fate for an idea whose time (one had hoped) had come at last, and it means that one is obliged to make precisely the kinds of distinctions that the organizers of this exhibition—for reasons one can only guess at—have refused to make.

That for the founding fathers of abstract painting—Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Kupka—the aesthetics of abstraction was inseparable from doctrines derived from

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theosophy and kindred notions of the spiritual and the occult is undeniable. The evidence on this issue is now so overwhelming that the burden of argument has decisively been shifted to the doubters. That this particular conflation of the aesthetic and the spiritual owed much to the theory and practice of Symbolist art and poetry is also undeniable. It therefore should come as no surprise that the soundest and most informative sections of the "Spiritual" show are those which dwell on the movement's Symbolist origins and on its first successes in severing its ties to the representational element in Symbolism in order to establish an abstractionist alternative to it.

I say that these are the soundest and most informative sections of the "Spiritual" show, and they are. Yet this is not to say that they are wholly satisfactory, for when it comes to representing the first generation of abstractionists and to tracing the course of its transition from a more or less Symbolist aesthetic to outright abstraction, the exhibition is curiously truncated and perfunctory. The first leap into abstraction was, after all, one of the most momentous events in the history of twentieth-century art, and it should strike us as such in an exhibition of this magnitude. But the truth is, it doesn't. Except for Mondrian, who gets better treatment than the others, this first generation of abstract painters is confined to a succession of small, cramped galleries which make these artists seem more like forerunners of a movement than—what is in fact the case—its first masters. Perhaps the organizers of the exhibition felt that Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Kupka were already so famous that their work didn't need to be shown at full strength. If so, they made a significant mistake, for it is precisely the obligation of an exhibition of this kind to re-establish both the power and the pre-eminence of the artists who gave this movement its start in life and set the standards for its future development. This, I regret to say, the "Spiritual" show does not do to the requisite degree. As a result, the weight of the exhibition is shifted to those many other figures who are taken to represent this future development—and this, in turn, raises a great many questions about the basic theme of the show. For the exact relation in which some of these other artists stand to the concept of "The Spiritual in Art" is itself a problem that is never adequately addressed.

Before turning to this problem, however, something must be said about an artist who is being acclaimed as the exhibition's major "discovery"—the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint (1862-1944). Except in one crucial respect, this artist might very well have been considered a prime candidate for an exhibition on this theme. She is said to have painted in an abstract style as early as 1906, and her art was apparently based on spiritualist doctrine. The trouble is, the pictures exhibited in the "Spiritual" show are not very good. As documents in the history of abstraction, they have a certain interest, to be sure, but it is not an aesthetic interest. Af Klint's paintings are essentially colored diagrams. To accord them a place of honor alongside the work of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Kupka, in the section of the exhibition devoted to the pioneers of abstraction, is absurd. Af Klint is simply not an artist in their class, and—dare one say it?—would never have been given this inflated treatment if she had not been a woman.

Both the structure of the "Spiritual" show and the elaborate installation given it in Los Angeles are extremely complicated—needlessly complicated, I think—and something needs to be said about this, too, before we turn to the question of the other artists who have been selected to represent the theme of the exhibition. As I have already indicated, the first section is devoted to Symbolism. This leads into a circular room—no doubt itself symbolic in its shape—containing books which are known to have influenced the kind of mystical and occult thought which played a role in the genesis of abstract art. There then follows, in more or less orderly fashion, the five galleries devoted to Kandinsky, Kupka, Malevich, Mondrian,

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and Hilma af Klint (in that sequence).[2] With the eighth gallery, however, the exhibition takes an abrupt turn. Thenceforth the focus is no longer on individual artists but on thematic motifs—in other words, iconography—designed to aid the viewer in the task (admittedly not an easy one) of ferreting out the "hidden meanings" to be found in the remaining works of art.

There are five thematic motifs in all—"Cosmic Imagery," "Duality," "Vibration," "Synesthesia," and "Sacred Geometry"—and the artists selected to illuminate these motifs, or to be illuminated by them (one isn't entirely certain of the order here), are so various in style, so different in intellectual outlook, and even, alas, so disparate in their spiritual allegiances that it is extremely difficult, if not indeed impossible, to make any consistent sense of what one sees in these last five galleries. Most viewers, I suspect, simply give up on the tedious task of attempting to discern the traces of cosmic imagery in some pictures and the effects of synesthesia in others, and settle for whatever aesthetic delights and intellectual nourishment the art may afford in the traditional way. Long before we have reached the end of this exhibition, its governing theme has in any case been lost in a hodgepodge of conflicting aesthetic strategies.

Perhaps the best way of grasping the vagaries of the "Spiritual in Art" show is to see that it is finally not one exhibition but two (at least). The first is the one devoted to Symbolism and to the origins of abstraction in the work of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Kupka. In their different ways, these four artists *were* deeply immersed in spiritualist, anti-materialist doctrines, which served to inspire and abet their hard-won efforts to eliminate from their art the kind of pictorial representation of earthly life that, in their eyes, had come to signify a materialism they feared and despised. What they yearned for was transcendence and spiritual release, and art became their principal means of achieving it. Thus, their success in supplanting representation with pictorial forms sufficiently abstract to embody what was for them the vision of a higher, metaphysical reality constituted the kind of triumph—a triumph in the realm of ideas as well as in the realm of artistic expression—that could never again be repeated in quite the same way. For what they had decisively and fatefully changed was not the ideas that had influenced them—these they had pretty much taken as they found them, and they made no serious effort to modify them—but the way their own artistic objectives were to be formulated and brought to fruition. Spiritualist ideas served these artists well, though only for a limited time in most cases, as a philosophical catalyst in creating a new art; but they could not—and did not—survive as a permanent program for art. After that first generation of pioneers, other artists might take up theosophy, the occult, and sundry other systems of spiritualist belief as an individual option, but the "spiritual" as such would never again constitute a movement in art and never again play so fundamental a role in determining the artistic vicissitudes of abstract painting.

This, essentially, is why the "Spiritual in Art" exhibition takes such an abrupt turn after those first galleries devoted to Symbolism and the pioneers of abstraction, and in effect becomes another, different exhibition—a survey devoted to individual options in both style and belief. And once the exhibition bids its farewell to that first generation, just about anything in the realm of the irrational or the mythical or the merely subjective is allowed to pass muster as a token of

2 In fact, Malevich was not given an entire room in the show, but was included in an installation called "Malevich, Matiushin, and Their Circles." Mikhail Matiushin was a contemporary of Malevich's in Russia, and for a time exerted a similar influence. No doubt the almost minor role given these figures in the "Spiritual" show can be accounted for by the fact that the Los Angeles County Museum of Art had already mounted a comprehensive exhibition of the Russian avant-garde in 1980. Still, considering the major place which these Russians occupy in the history of the subject of this exhibition, they should probably have been given a stronger representation.

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"the spiritual." Marcel Duchamp's Dadaist ideology? Jasper Johns's Neo-Dadaist imagery? Yves Klein's high jinks or Jackson Pollock's struggle with psychoanalysis? All are here in force, and so are such disparate figures as Georgia O'Keeffe and Mario Merz, Francis Picabia and Bruce Nauman, Adolph Gottlieb and Arnulf Rainer. Amongst them, to be sure, are artists of a genuinely mystical sensibility—Richard Pousette-Dart, for example, and the late Mark Tobey—but the real role played by mystical belief in their art can only be obscured by the company they are obliged to keep in this exhibition. An exhibition devoted to "The Spiritual in Art" which accords the work of Duchamp a more conspicuous role than that given to Kandinsky or Malevich is a show that has gone wildly off the rails.

If we wish to seek an explanation for this curious turn in the "Spiritual" show, it is not to be found, I think, either in the realm of ideas or in the realm of aesthetics—it is to be found, rather, in the mundane world of the contemporary art museum and the pressures which now exert so decisive an influence on the way major exhibitions are conceived and organized. The "Spiritual" show was first conceived of years ago, and had, I believe, a rather different shape in the earlier stages of its preparation. (We can probably glean something of this shape in several of the scholarly articles which are published in the mammoth book accompanying the show—especially those written by Robert P. Welsh, Sixten Ringbom, John E. Bowlt, and Rose-Carol Washton Long.[3] What happened along the way, however, was the building of a new wing at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and it was a major misfortune, I think, that an exhibition originally conceived to be a serious and scholarly art-historical investigation into a crucial chapter of modern art had to be turned into something like a crowd-pleasing blockbuster in order to serve as an appropriately showy event for the inauguration of this new addition—the Robert O. Anderson Building. Given this atrocious circumstance, it is a mercy, I suppose, that anything of the original conception survived. Much did, of course—though at times the substance is more easily accessible in the book accompanying the show than in the itself. And whatever one's criticism of "The Spiritual in Art" as an exhibition, all our future explorations of its important subject will in one degree or another be obliged to take serious account of this event. But what a pity it had to succumb to so much muddle along the way!

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3 *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* was co-published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press (434 pages; hardcover price $55, paperback $24.95).

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New tales for old wives

by Gloria G. Fromm

In the early, almost mythical, 1960s, Charlotte Payne-Townshend, the wife of George Bernard Shaw, was the subject of a thoroughly informative biography that managed to justify its existence while making only modest claims for Mrs. G. B. S.[1] Although some of the questions that it raised had their expected Freudian ring (What did she learn from her parents' unhappy marriage? Was there sex between the Shaws?), they were handled with care and delicacy, out of deference—one presumes—to the famous man as well as to the limits of then current knowledge. Since Charlotte Payne-Townshend had not herself done anything much more noteworthy than marry the skittish Shaw, there were no real surprises in *Mrs. G. B. S.,* except perhaps that Shaw's wife for nearly half a century seemed less recoverable than one would have thought. Janet Dunbar's vivid portrait of the early years of a restless, intelligent young woman faded after the marriage, as if to illustrate how unlikely it was that anyone could stand out in relation to G. B. S. himself.

That Shaw's wife did stand up to him is quite evident, nonetheless, and to some extent at least she followed her own non-Shavian interests. Like a number of others in the Twenties and Thirties with longings for the infinite, she came under the brief spell of the Russian philosopher Ouspensky, whose best-known work claimed to have found the key to the enigmas of the world, a claim that might have struck Mrs. Shaw as a welcome challenge to the omniscience at home. In any case, she had money of her own as well as cosmic yearnings, and apparently went out of her way to satisfy them. It is not clear how much success she had.

What does come through most clearly in this treatment of the Shaws is Dunbar's rueful recognition that, no matter how you twist and turn them, the proportions don't change: "Mrs. G. B. S." says it all. Once the marriage took place, Charlotte Payne-Townshend's identity was more or less fixed for the rest of her life, and neither she nor her biographer seemed unduly troubled by it. In her old age, moreover, bedridden by a crippling form of lumbago from which she was virtually doubled up, an increasingly difficult Charlotte Shaw was patiently tended by her equally old but still upright husband. One comes away, finally, with the image of a woman who may have been bent by wifehood but who was certainly not broken.

Since the days of *Mrs. G. B. S.,* women and biography have entered into a dramatic new relationship, significantly altering the presentation of great men's wives and very often of the great men themselves. Janet Dunbar's disposition toward accommodation and compromise has been gradually displaced by antagonism and assertiveness, as unsung wives, deprived wives, maligned wives become increasingly the subjects of current polemical

1 *Mrs. G. B. S.: A Portrait,* by Janet Dunbar, was published by Harper & Row in 1963.

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biography. If most wives were traditionally ignored (or barely mentioned) in books about their husbands, then the obvious remedy was to give them more space and at the same time to fix the blame for the long-standing neglect where it belonged—not on the women, by any means. And while the iron was hot, a few deserving *sisters* of famous men could be taken care of as well. Lest this seem too harsh and premature an abstraction of what has happened during the last twenty years, a somewhat concrete sampling might be in order, beginning with Nancy Milford's *Zelda.*[2]

The story of the Scott Fitzgeralds and their "Twenties" marriage has been told so many times, most recently in James Mellow's *Invented Lives,*[3] that it needs no rehearsing here. All the "getting and spending," the Atlantic crossings, the adolescent antics at home and abroad, have been endlessly catalogued as though their fascination were eternal. Scott was always the center of interest, but the Fitzgeralds lived their public lives as a pair, and from the first Zelda's strangeness did not escape notice—and it would have been strange if it *had,* since her behavior and speech were at times positively bizarre. Among the witnesses to Zelda's numerous oddities—such as leaping across a restaurant table or asking Scott for a cigarette just as he was negotiating a mountain curve in their car—was John Dos Passos, who spent an afternoon with her in an amusement park and who was driven to conclude then and there that the woman was mad. That Scott was rapidly becoming an alcoholic merely added to the fun and made them a couple you definitely had to watch.

But singling out Zelda as the subject of a biography required a good deal more than watching. Nancy Milford related in her preface how she had travelled thousands of miles in search of Zelda, and how she had been moved as she had never been moved before by her letters to Scott, most of them written in the Thirties from various mental institutions. Milford made it clear, too, that the principal aim of her book was to find out why, after only ten years of marriage, Scott Fitzgerald's wife had broken down, why, that is, the Southern belle—with her "clean wild hair brushed back from her face"—had gone insane. Dazzled by her freshness and beauty, Milford saw the young Zelda as "the American girl living the American dream," a dream that something or somebody had turned into a nightmare. It goes without saying that the finger would point eventually to Scott and to the marriage, and that Zelda would be seen not as having the fixed identity of a Mrs. G. B. S. but as having no identity at all. This, Milford seemed to be suggesting, was what Scott had engineered and what finally drove Zelda mad. She had longed for her own accomplishments to match his, but whatever she took up—dancing, story writing, painting—he somehow managed to spoil.

In other words, the real project underlying Milford's biography was to construct the identity that Zelda *might have had* under other circumstances. It involved her, of course, in a detailed account of Zelda's early prewar years in Montgomery, Alabama, before she met and married Scott. They were privileged years, during which, as Milford seemed disinclined to notice, Zelda's unchecked willfulness and exhibitionism spelled trouble—foreshadowed not only the fabulous marriage to Scott and exhibitionism, *en duo,* on a grand scale, but also the private crash that came shortly after the big public one in '29 and that virtually put an end to their life together. In light of so graphic a picture—however unwittingly drawn—of Zelda's disturbed and disturbing girlhood, with its wild impulses and "acting out," one is frankly compelled to ask whether Zelda's greatest potential might not have been the breakdown she suffered at thirty.

As a matter of fact, while it is generally agreed that the marriage precipitated the breakdown, for Milford the breakdown

2 *Zelda: A Biography* was published by Harper & Row in 1970.

3 James Mellow's *Invented Lives,* originally published by Houghton Mifflin in 1984, was reprinted in paperback by Ballantine in 1986.

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actually provided the strongest piece of evidence for what Zelda Fitzgerald might have been able to make of herself if the world—and Scott—had not stood in her way: a novel called *Save Me the Waltz,* written in something like six weeks while she was in a Baltimore psychiatric clinic. One of the many curiosities of the Fitzgerald relationship was the effect on Scott of this largely incoherent fiction. By all accounts (including his own), it made him frantic and hysterical because he saw Zelda encroaching on the matter of his own unfinished novel, the work long in the making that would finally appear as *Tender is the Night.* Without Zelda's original manuscript, which has been lost, it is hard to know just how much duplication there really was, but Scott's reaction seems excessive in any case, in light of both the surviving proofs and the text as published, which make all too plain Zelda's cracked shell of a mind. Fitzgerald, one suspects, could not help himself, but Milford took Zelda's book even more seriously than he, subjecting it to an extended critical analysis as though there were a readable narrative instead of raw data from a disordered psyche.

Scott's own behavior might well be explained as part of the "craziness" he and Zelda had in common, which Leon Edel has described—in the language of psychopathology—as *folie à deux,* where two people (often a married couple) share a delusional system. Milford's biography provides more than enough evidence to support Edel's point, but it also illustrates another brand of folly, that of the biographer who ignores her own findings, who takes her subject's wishes for deeds and her yearnings for accomplishments. Zelda certainly had a streak of talent (a "brilliant offbeat style" was how James Mellow put it in *Invented Lives*), and Scott mined it ruthlessly for his fiction. But to intimate that he, and not her own incapacities, prevented her from becoming a full-fledged artist is to misread all the psychological signs. Even Fitzgerald, in his last, worn-out years, when he tried to defend himself against her family's accusation that it was he who had caused her breakdown, finally seemed to understand how profoundly damaged Zelda had already been when he first met her.

Unwilling to admit the deep roots of Zelda's illness, Nancy Milford was not inclined to make very much of Scott's hard-earned understanding: her project called for a different brand of damages. Even so, she did not present Zelda as exclusively the victim-wife in the way Diane Johnson would process the first Mrs. Meredith a couple of years later, in the book generally known as *Lesser Lives.*[4] In this case, the challenge lay not so much in being able to imagine an alternate identity for her subject as in being able to create—out of whole cloth—an entire life. For if relatively little was known (then and now) about George Meredith, even less information was available about his first wife. Despite the fact that she was the favorite daughter of Thomas Love Peacock—satirist, skeptic, and great friend of Shelley—Mary Ellen Meredith left few traces behind: a handful of letters, a commonplace book, some food recipes, and two prose pieces about housewifery, published early in her short-lived marriage to Meredith. Quite undaunted by so small a store, Johnson proceeded to imagine what must have happened between a young ambitious writer (he was twenty-two) and an older woman (by seven years) who had not only been married before and already borne a child but had "educated herself," when a teenager, by reading French novels. With such bits and pieces—this particular one about novel-reading gleaned from a letter written by Mary Shelley that described Mary Ellen Peacock at fourteen—Johnson constructed an elaborate edifice of innuendo and surmise, held together by her firm belief that Peacock's daughter, brought up in a freethinking environment where advanced views about women and sex prevailed, could only have been ground to dust in the repressive Victo-

4 Diane Johnson's *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives* was published in 1972 by Knopf.

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rian world of George Meredith, the Portsmouth tailor's son.

Actually, neither George *nor* Mary Ellen had a chance in the courtroom set up by Johnson, though for *him,* of course, there were no tears shed: the fault, after all, lay deep in his character, while Mary Ellen's gender alone had determined her fate by forcing her into marriage. This—one of the few options open to a nineteenth-century woman—usually meant, as everyone knows by now, frequent debilitating pregnancies, and when the woman happened to be married to a man like George Meredith, sensitive, "high-strung," and "passionately ambitious" for a literary fame not to be jeopardized "by every day work" (which put them constantly in debt), her options had been reduced practically to zero. And, irony of ironies, Meredith's weak digestive system could not tolerate the gourmet meals his wife loved to cook. For Johnson, then, Mary Ellen's creativity was blocked on all sides, sacrificed to Meredith's delicate stomach as well as to his craving for fame. That she was driven to leave him after only six or seven years seemed to Johnson axiomatic.

The details of the first Mrs. Meredith's "elopement" from her husband are scanty, but the universal conclusion has been that she left with her lover, the painter Henry Wallis, who was also the father of the child born soon after. Taking issue with this received view as an all-too-conventional one that may have fit the circumstances but not her subject's character, Johnson thought it far more likely that Mary Ellen had left George in order to save her soul. Longing for independence (especially from him) and hoping to earn a livelihood by her own pen, she separated from her husband at the same time she just happened to be involved with Wallis. Put another way, to Johnson, Wallis was quite incidental, but even if she *had* gone off with him, it would simply mean that in the world of the 1850s a woman of Mary Ellen's class could not have acted alone. Alas, fate was dogging her steps. She died three years later when she was only forty, perhaps from an old kidney ailment aggravated by numerous pregnancies but certainly without having had the time or opportunity to prove herself. And, to Johnson's disgust, George Meredith went on to become a famous novelist, who never forgave his first wife for insulting him by leaving him and whose "books are full of erring wives." Johnson's own book, full of scorn for erring (and timid) biographers as well as for erring (and hard-hearted) husbands, was meant to evoke by every conceivable fictional means the world that had coldly and silently witnessed the sufferings of Mary Ellen Meredith, a world of sin and guilt that no mere Biographer—tied not only to Fact but also to inhibiting Convention—could possibly have reproduced. But like a postmodern novel calling attention to its own apparatus, *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives* was an entirely self-conscious vehicle: fiction wrestling pretentiously with fact; footnotes vying with text; capital letters carrying the derogatory tone and meaning; the whole enterprise driven by an inflated sense of mission and directed mainly at those who shared the author's point of view, readers who would miss none of her innuendos and already felt they knew what a nineteenth-century woman's life had to be like.

Reconstructed along such preconceived lines, as though it lay there ready and waiting to emerge, the first Mrs. Meredith's life was turned into a political exemplum, duly illustrating a variety of sins against women. In contrast, the life of the second Mrs. Hardy, scrupulously researched and presented by Robert Gittings and Jo Manton (themselves a husband-and-wife team), became a curious study in understatement.[5] Avoiding the slightest temptation to claim for their subject more than ordinary abilities or "small talent," they produced a biography that seems a crossbreed, as though a life were being singled out for its *lack* of inter-

5 *The Second Mrs. Hardy,* by Robert Gittings and Jo Manton, was published by the University of Washington Press in 1979.

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est. Perhaps this was precisely Gittings and Manton's point—that the ordinariness of Thomas Hardy's wife had never been fully documented. But it has certainly been proven now, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Gittings himself, as Thomas Hardy's most recent biographer, knew only too well the background of his second marriage: how Hardy, nearly seventy and unhappy in his first marriage, struggling with *The Dynasts,* that vast epic in blank verse and prose, met Florence Dugdale and wooed her for seven years behind his wife's back. She was twenty-eight when they met, with just the kind of delicate beauty that appealed to him: a certified teacher who hated teaching and loved poetry, who had grown up in Enfield, a few miles north of London, where John Keats also went to school and where she was taught to revere "great authors." In Enfield, too, from her biographers' point of view, the great deception practiced on Florence Dugdale had its beginnings—in the "literary evenings and conversaziones" that fostered a taste for genteel verse and the expression of fine sentiments. Thus, already persuaded that she had some talent, when Hardy praised her writing she believed him; when he touched up one of her stories and sent it for her to the *Cornhill,* she thought it had been accepted on its merits; when he persuaded the editor of an illustrated paper to hire her, she assumed it was in recognition of her own skills. Grown used to Hardy's tender ministrations, Florence was completely unprepared for the change that came over the great author when his wife suddenly died. He had paid little attention for years, it would seem, to the ailing Emma, and her death took him by surprise—as did the manuscript he found among her papers, in which she affectingly recalled their early years together. The result was that Hardy could barely attend to Florence, so obsessed was he with the memory of Emma. In the months following—even after he and Florence were married—Hardy devoted himself almost exclusively to a series of poems that revealed, in his biographer's view, all the guilt and remorse activated by Emma's death.

Whether Gittings has read these poems rightly or not, the second marriage would certainly appear to have had its problems. Chief among them, however, had to be Florence Hardy's indisputable ordinariness. Led astray by false ideals as well as by Hardy's oblique eroticism—or the wayward muse of a genius—how could she have understood her own unhappiness? Or, for that matter, the irony in the fact that being Hardy's wife required an unexpected degree of selflessness and sacrifice, costing her—as Gittings and Manton show—the very beauty that had earned her Hardy's attention in the first place? Yet the marriage lasted fourteen years, until Hardy's death at the age of eighty-seven, and in the eyes of the world Florence Hardy was "the priestess of his cult."

She herself may have felt that her worst problems began after her husband died, since most of her two-volume biography of Hardy, published within two years of his death, had actually been written by him. To make matters worse, in the same year (1930) as her second volume, Somerset Maugham's satiric novel, *Cakes and Ale,* appeared, with its nasty portrait of an aged writer and his much younger wife, identified by virtually all the reviewers as Mr. and Mrs. Hardy. It is at this low point in her life that Gittings and Manton began their biography of Florence, with a view—as they themselves put it—to discovering "the real character of the second Mrs. Hardy" as opposed to the fictional, something no one had seen fit to inquire about until then. By the end of the book, not only had they documented her "real character," but they had also succeeded in showing why it had never aroused any interest. Yet they seem to have thought they were doing Florence Hardy double justice by ascribing her defects to the cultural environment in which she had grown up and by carefully distinguishing her own modest character from that of the calculating wife in *Cakes and Ale.* Surely this is a form of justice that comes perilously close to punishment. For all their stated intent to make Hardy's second wife *known* for the first time, obliging them to point out in the process his failings as

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man and husband, Gittings and Manton reveal—more clearly than anything else—the drastic limitations of the woman they chose as their subject.

In their most recent collaboration—on a new life of Dorothy Wordsworth—the same misplaced zeal is apparent, even though here the famous brother does not seem to have been, as Hardy was, a target.[6] On the contrary, he was left out as much as possible, with a view to giving Dorothy the space and attention she deserves. But once again, though fostered and endorsed by prevailing attitudes toward women and biography, the good intentions backfired, producing a life with its center neatly cut away. As Bruce Bawer noted in his review of *Dorothy Wordsworth* in these pages, omitting William and his poetry from Dorothy's life deprived it of the very meaning she intended it to have. So that instead of paying homage to an extraordinary woman, Gittings and Manton have actually set aside, *devalued* her own strongest feelings, just when even radical feminists, studying Dorothy's rich prose texts in order to intensify their value, have taken to regarding them as subtle interactions with her brother's poems. Professing to admire her, Gittings and Manton have succeeded in belittling her—by attempting what amounts to a reduction (for *her*) from dependent sisterhood to independent womanhood. Whether you deplore such submergence of self or not, whether you choose to call it absorption by the Other, or extreme passivity, or perhaps even arrested development, to rub out William the poet in an effort to highlight Dorothy the woman can only turn her into a far smaller person than the one she worked so hard to be.

Achieving results very different from those they intended would seem a hazard that biographers in particular are likely to run, especially when they tie themselves into cultural/political programs. For example, Jean Strouse's biography of Alice James, the chronically and mysteriously ailing younger sister of William and Henry, can be said to suffer from too close—and deterministic—a reading of the life.[7] The private struggles of Strouse's subject, both physical and mental, have been carefully placed in their nineteenth-century context, with causative connections made between the cultural environment of women and Alice's "invalid" existence. But these links have struck some readers as forced and questionable, and the portrait of Alice as overcharged with psychoanalytic doctrine, her life experience turned into a tale relentlessly plotted. Even more to the point, Alice comes through as painfully lacking in the creative energy that drove her older brothers to overcome their own personal disabilities. So that while explicitly denying that she was making Alice "a heroine (or victim-as-heroine)," Strouse could not help attributing her failure to the James family as well as to society at large. Paradoxically, Alice seemed to have been *incapacitated* by her sizable share of James talent. Perhaps with less, she might have managed to escape from herself, but along with the James gifts came the James will to power—exercised by Alice through illness, the only weapon she felt was available to her. Put differently, Alice was forced to devote virtually all her "fine intelligence" to resolving what Strouse presents as the "essential contradiction" of her life—the fact that she was both "a James and a girl." Such were the large modern terms in which Strouse argued for the meaning and value of Alice James's small, strangled life; and Strouse derived them, at least in part (as her introduction shows), from the celebrated essay by Virginia Woolf that has had more influence on biographies of women in the Seventies and Eighties—and has been more misused—than almost any other single work: "A Room of One's Own."

In this essay that has become a sacred text for large numbers of contemporary women, Woolf imagined the dire fate of a "wonder-

6 *Dorothy Wordsworth,* by Robert Gittings and Jo Manton, was published by Oxford University Press/Clarendon in 1985.

7 *Alice James: A Biography,* by Jean Strouse, was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1980.

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fully gifted" younger sister of Shakespeare, a woman *consumed* by the urge to express herself and driven wild by the poetic sensibility she was not supposed to have by virtue of her sex. She would have had no encouragement from her family except to marry; and she might have run off to London expressly to avoid marriage. Once there, she would surely have gravitated to the theaters, caught the eye of an actor-manager, and in due course "found herself with child." From Virginia Woolf's point of view, this could have had but one result—suicide—for in her opinion "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at." Chances are that Woolf was more right than not in her *feel* for the limitations operating on an inspired woman in the sixteenth century and that in all likelihood a sister of Shakespeare *would* have been undone by her anachronistic sensibility. But many of the actual women—including the highly verbal Alice James—who are fitted into the Woolfian paradigm as sisters under the skin have had little of the intensity and creative drive of the gifted being whose lineaments Woolf conjured up in her essay. It is almost as though, since Woolf's stirring vignette took hold, the impediments have counted far more than the gifts, as though frustration and suffering were now principal prerequisites for biographies of women, prerequisites all too often met by the wives of famous men precisely bcause so many of them have left little else to show for themselves.

Misery is certainly the abiding theme of the recently published lives of Jenny Marx and Sara Coleridge, with most of their suffering attributed to the great men themselves —to the extraordinary demands they made on their wives and the sacrifices that marriage to them entailed. As H. F. Peters baldly put it in the introduction to *Red Jenny,* his biography of Jenny Marx, "the woman behind every great man is the victim of his passions . . ."[8] But Peters was also driven to confess that "during the seven years of [his] efforts to understand the life of Jenny Marx there were times when [he] felt that it could not be done, because so many personal documents, letters and diaries, had been destroyed or were being withheld." His solution, since he claimed not to want to "present an ideological thesis," was "to lay out the facts about her life with her husband and her children, as she herself gave them." In other words, he would provide what amounts to a doubly partial story. Yet, in spite of his disclaimer, the raison d'être of his biography is surely ideological, for it has come into being—with all its admitted handicaps—in a cultural climate that does not mind them, that does not object to incompleteness or partiality so long as it is on the right side—the wife's side. But when there is virtually no interpretation, no attempt at a translation of Jenny Marx's self-expressed feelings or their tones, her life can easily become one huge cliché. "[She] lived and died in the vortex of her husband's fateful gospel": so Peters was content to sum it up. And so at least one reviewer rightly complained that he had told Karl's life story and not Jenny's.

She has fared no better at the hands of an equally sympathetic, equally uninquiring woman, Edna Healey, who recites the events of Jenny Marx's life along with those of Mary Livingstone's and Emma Darwin's in a book called *Wives of Fame.*[9] Like Peters, Healey concentrates on the hardship and woe in a life with the absolutist Karl Marx: political exile, poverty, illness, births and deaths. The chronicle is grim indeed, and the moral all too obvious: such is "the fate of those who [choose to] live with demon-heroes." Mary Livingstone's sufferings turn out to have been even greater than Jenny's, married as she was to a religious fanatic who (unlike the thoroughly bourgeois Marx)

8 *Red Jenny: A Life with Karl Marx,* by H. F. Peters; St. Martin's Press, 208 pages, $14.95.

9 *Wives of Fame: Mary Livingstone, Jenny Marx, Emma Darwin,* by Edna Healey, was published in London in 1986 by Sidgwick and Jackson.

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cared nothing for this world, so that she had to endure one pregnancy after another under the most primitive conditions, dying at an early age in the wilds of Africa. By contrast, Emma Darwin's secure, placid, and long-lived marriage to the dedicated scientist, which produced its own small army of children yet managed to provide a nurturing environment for them, is presented as an instance of great good luck for both husband and wife. But the book offers no comprehensive view of either nineteenth-century life or marriage, much less of sexuality. It seems to have come into being in order to point out that the world has completely forgotten the self-sacrificing wives of Livingstone, Marx, and Darwin—but without explaining *why* the world ought to remember them now.

When there is little to tell of a life beyond its pain and suffering (and these are shared by untold millions of men as well as women), when, in spite of voluminous archives, the biographical materials are thin and the individual consciousness remains closed and impenetrable, what drives the study of such a life? Molly Lefebure would claim, no doubt, that for *her* obscure subject, Sara Coleridge, "the most maligned of great men's wives," biography is the only corrective possible. It is certainly true that, since her own day, Coleridge's wife has borne the character of an ill-tempered, unloving ninny, a characterization Coleridge himself not only subscribed to but also apparently originated, hence the nearly universal readiness with which it has been handed down. No matter how many questions about the poet have come up over the years, no matter how many subtle shifts in the judgment on him have taken place, the verdict on Sara has remained substantially the same. Molly Lefebure set out to change that verdict, in effect, to clear Sara Coleridge's name at long last by examining all the surviving documents—every scrap—for information that might cast doubt on the received view of Sara and the marriage: biography, in other words, as a rescue mission.

Lefebure's book about Sara, *The Bondage of Love,*[10] grew out of her earlier study of Sara's husband, *The Bondage of Opium,* in which she argued at great length—and persuasively—for the disastrous effects on Coleridge of his drug addiction. In this new book she maintains, as one might expect, that Sara's own behavior could not have been unaffected by her husband's habit; and she tries to show how the strains in the marriage did in fact stem from opium—indeed, how living with Coleridge became more and more difficult, if not impossible, as even his loyal friends, the Wordsworths, finally had to admit. In Lefebure's view, then, opium (and not Wordsworth's sister-in-law, whom Coleridge claimed to love) came between the Coleridges, bringing out his worst tendencies, if not altering his personality; and yet despite its uncertain beginnings, with Coleridge attempting to retreat from his hasty proposal of marriage, their relationship was firmly based in strong, positive feeling on both sides.

Admittedly, the Coleridge marriage makes more sense seen this way instead of monochromatically, especially since after years of estrangement there was something of a rapprochement at the end, when his drug habit had been brought under control and he was being looked after in Highgate. So that even though Lefebure's demonstration involves some tenuous and inconclusive evidence—guessing at the contents of missing letters, for example, or presuming to know how S. T. and Sara actually felt at certain crucial moments, it has rendered the old picture of the marriage somewhat suspect. But does this mean that Sara was not as unsuitable a wife for a poet and a genius as everyone has always assumed? For whatever the poet's reasons for believing her unsuitable, believe it he did, and no biographer can alter those feelings, opium-induced or not. In the same

10 *The Bondage of Love: A Life of Mrs. Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* by Molly Lefebure, was published in London in 1986 by Victor Gollancz. Norton will publish the book here this month (287 pages, $17.95).

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way, even if Sara's intelligence could actually be measured and shown to be considerably greater than people have thought, this would not change the perception of general incompetence—however unjust or inaccurate—that seemed to prevail throughout her life. Moreover, the life has already been lived—in circumstances whose complex causes and effects are scarcely recoverable. To argue for a new reading of a body of work is one thing; it is quite another to put Sara Coleridge's scant remains under the hermeneutic microscope, as though her painful experience with Coleridge could be treated like an accomplishment worth preserving. In truth, neither his part in the marriage *nor* hers can bear very close scrutiny. Sara Coleridge herself seemed to realize this, for after Coleridge's death she burned the accumulated correspondence of forty years—in order, she claimed, to protect her husband's reputation, but at the same time destroying the evidence that might have left no doubt about her own role in the relationship. And the question of motive remains, despite Lefebure's partisan certainty that the mistreated Sara Coleridge had only her husband's interests at heart after all.

The method of Lefebure's book, involving as it does the attempt to reconstruct a domestic life, is carried even further in *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* by Jan Marsh, a biographical/historical study of the models who sat for the Pre-Raphaelite painters and became their mistresses and wives.[11] Since then, they have been mythologized as the faces and forms in the famous paintings, but with little or no attention paid to their real lives and background, which were always obscure in any case. What Marsh set out to do was to give these women—six of them—human dimensions, so that they could be moved out of the realm of male-dominated myth, where they have long been "viewed merely as satellites of the men," into a world that would recognize their own creative urges and ambitions as well as their separate personalities. She combed the Pre-Raphaelite source materials for information that would fill in her account of their daily lives as well as for evidence of undeveloped gifts and frustrated longings. There was Lizzie Siddall, for example, trying her hand at drawing, and Georgie Macdonald taking up wood-engraving. But neither one of them got very far, mainly because—as Marsh presents it—even the *support* of an untrained woman's artistic efforts in the mid-nineteenth century could become an impediment. Thus, Lizzie may have been too lavishly praised by Gabriel Rossetti and persuaded to paint before she had learned to draw; or perhaps, without the benefit of "life studies," she could not have mastered figures. Whatever the reason, the result was that "most of the people in her pictures have no legs . . . ." As for Georgie Macdonald, her marriage to Burne-Jones—in Marsh's view—prevented her from realizing her own ambitions. To support this view, Marsh describes how, "on the eve of her wedding, [Georgie] assessed their material goods: £30 in cash from Ned's earnings and her own 'small deal table with a drawer in it that held my wood-engraving tools.' This table, which appears to have been her only significant possession, was clearly valued as a solid symbol of her own aspirations. It tells us that, like her husband, Georgie had serious artistic ambitions, although as it turned out, Ned's brushes and pens were to eclipse her engraving-tools." Surely that table of Georgie's "tells us" nothing of the kind. Nor does the equally simplistic argument that is dominated by feminist ideals and that runs through Marsh's entire book make her case for the undeveloped powers she wants to claim: "women were denied opportunities and then defined as inferior"; this "makes it hard to assess their abilities." How do you know, in other words, what these women might have been capable of achieving if they had begun with the educational advantages of a Rossetti, a Burne-Jones, a William Morris, instead of growing up—as some of them did—in the slums of London? What if they

11 *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood,* by Jan Marsh, was published in 1985 in London by Quartet Books.

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had *not* had "defeats and deficiencies imposed on their sex"? Still, whether "imposed" or not, the "defeats and deficiencies" are all too apparent, as Marsh's account cannot help but show, and in the last analysis they do make a difference, though it means that her subjects can scarcely be distinguished from the rest of humanity—unless, of course, all that matters is what might have been rather than what was.

Once again, an elaborate rescue operation has turned into demolition. Removed from the world of myth and transcendent value, the Pre-Raphaelite women are reduced to ordinary, insignificant human beings. And in her extraordinary postscript, Jan Marsh argues for the significance of the insignificant—for all the "details of [women's] emotional lives, domestic responsibilities, family relations and . . . social activities" that have never been deemed worthy of "serious attention" and are always dismissed at once as "trivialization." But it is Jan Marsh herself who has trivialized her subjects by crying their limitations and rationalizing their weaknesses, by studying meager endowments as though they were great gifts, by failing—in the very act of investigating the reality of these women's lives—to acknowledge and accept that reality for what it was. So, too, when women who were mainly wives, with no special gifts or achievements, are made biographical subjects in their own right, the effort required to give their lives equal significance as well as space makes a mockery of the delicate and humane art of biography. When praise demeans because it is undeserved; when to magnify is to diminish and to single out is to expose (but no one will admit this), we are truly in the land of political make-believe, where categories are more important than what is in them and where moral currencies have been so inverted that the wrongs of the past have become the "rights" of today.

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What happened to British art?

by Kermit S. Champa

There is, I would guess, a sizable group of people who, despite their routine sympathy with internationally recognized (read Franco-American) achievements in twentieth-century art, find the thought of a large British retrospective something less than exciting. As with the Whitney Biennials, a vaguely purgatorial aura might be said to surround the prospect. Both types of exhibitions provide "opportunities" not to be missed, yet they do this without promising the stuff of deep aesthetic challenge. In fact, they almost guarantee the very opposite, which is to say a deployment of trends and some insignificant degree of titillation, the latter felt most keenly in contexts having nothing to do with art.

The current British twentieth-century retrospective at the Royal Academy in London—which is supplemented by a rather meek show entitled "Salon de refusés" at the nearby Albemarle Gallery—does comparatively little to improve the image of modern British painting and sculpture.[1] Rather than undertake much in the way of revision, the retrospective prefers instead to provide a comprehensive overview of artists and movements that are recognized by nonspecialists but not normally available for examination in depth.

To be sure, there are some biases of omission and some rather weird internal emphases in the show, expressed in what appear to be overt acts of over- or under-representation. For example, the two periods of internationalism (read abstraction), in the 1930s and 1960s, are deliberately neglected, which marks the nearest thing in the exhibition to a modified perspective on modern British work, and the modification is comparatively subtle. The Albemarle show rectifies the 1930s problem up to a point, but nothing helps the 1960s one. Apparently with the passage of time the French-inspired work of the Nicholson-Hepworth circle has become less of a threat to native artistic pride than the American incursions initiated by Patrick Heron in the mid-1950s. Whatever the case, the Royal Academy exhibition is about as "British" as it can be without being historically absurd. This means that it stresses representational work or abstract work that seems to engage notions of "meaning" in some readily definable way. In other words, "art for art's sake" has a rough time in the Royal Academy show, but then again it's been having a rough time nearly everywhere in recent years,

1 "British Art in the Twentieth Century: the Modern Movement" is on view at the Royal Academy of Art in London through April 15. From there it travels to the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. The exhibition's organizer is Susan Compton, assisted by Dr. Richard Cork, Norman Rosenthal, Dawn Ades, et al. The catalogue, with an introductory essay by Frederick Gore, has been published by Prestel (460 pages, $60). "Salon des refusés" was on display at the Albemarle Gallery in London from January 19 to March 13.

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and the signpost is always the same: American painting of the 1962-67 period is suppressed.

This suppression is arguably less problematic in a British retrospective than it might be in other contexts—the reason being that British painters, despite their enthusiasms, never managed to make much of importance from American examples. They understood Miró and Mondrian in the 1930s far better than they understood Louis, Noland, and Olitski in the early 1960s, largely, one suspects, because color was not so frontal an issue in the earlier period, while clear "plastic relationships" were. If Roger Fry accomplished nothing else for British art, he at least set up the critical conditions for intelligent British contributions to 1930s cubo-surrealism. The strongest and most self-knowing work at both the Royal Academy and the Albemarle Gallery represents this contribution—sometimes, as in Ceri Richard's partly painted wood relief, *Mother and Child* (1938), brilliantly. This piece (which is at the Albemarle Gallery) is about as compelling an object as one can find from 1938 anywhere.

But masterpieces are not what a modern British retrospective is about. There are very few works from any period in the century that belong in museums or collections outside Britain. This is something the Royal Academy exhibition very nearly flaunts, making "insularity" a point of satisfaction rather than embarrassment. A stubborn, complacent, inward-looking sense of opposition to any other culture is evident throughout this exhibition. Could it be otherwise? Probably not, for to probe the depths of modern British work (some sculpture excluded, of course) is to discover a peculiarly self-contained commodity which one cannot calibrate aesthetically—or in any other reliable way—with modern international developments at large. For better or worse, modern British art remains British first and modern second. The Royal Academy show confirms our sense that what used to be called the "British School" has survived the now nearly complete twentieth century as an aesthetic identity largely, if not absolutely, separate from all other "schools." The work shown together at the Royal Academy seems comfortable there, as it would be nowhere else.

Not surprisingly, the notion of a "British School" in the modern period was the subject of considerable discussion just after the turn of the century, when the first intellectually serious histories of modern art were being written. Of the important scholar/critics involved, two were Continental, Camille Mauclair and Julius Meier-Graefe, and two were British, J. E. Phythian and D. S. MacColl. The British contribution to the early histories came about not so much because of the routine participation of British art in the early modern movement, but because of the tension between what constituted "the modern" in England and elsewhere. MacColl, following in the critical footsteps of R. A. M. Stevenson, was an advocate of the contemporary supremacy of Impressionist art. Phythian, on the other hand, although as responsive as MacColl to the pictorial achievement of nineteenth-century France, posited a kind of separate-but-equal role for the modern French and English schools. In his *Fifty Years of Modern Painting*, Phythian persistently, almost schizophrenically, develops this view, discussing in completely incompatible terms the achievements of the two schools. In Phythian's book, what separates them is the importance given to the treatment of subject, or to purely aesthetic manipulation. While clearly more at ease with French than English work, Phythian planted a critical suggestion that would grow like a weed in British soil: the existence of two "moderns" rather than a single one primarily operative in France. By implication Britain was charged with the dignified role of stabilizing modernism by refusing to give up a national commitment to modern values that worked in opposition to those maintained on the Continent.

Writing in 1903, Meier-Graefe seems almost to have had a premonition of Phythian's position. A considerable number of

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pages in his *Entwicklungsgeschichte* ("Historical Developments") are devoted to demolishing any and all claims on behalf of Britain's role in modern art. While yielding eloquently to the singular importance of what he considers Constable's wholly independent achievement, Meier-Graefe is merciless toward the unintelligent "plagiarisms" of Reynolds and Turner. In Meier-Graefe's mind their plagiarisms combined with the "anti-art" ignorance of the Pre-Raphaelites to produce a "school" or "tradition" marked only by persistent aesthetic disaster with no claim to a positive role in developing modernism. Only to Burne-Jones did he pay a grudging compliment, saying that he "always contrives to make a picture of some sort. His way though trite is true."

The most formidable barrier to Meier-Graefe's attack was Whistler's art. In what he perceived as the thinness of pictorial ambition and accomplishment in Whistler, Meier-Graefe found the justification for arguing that as a "pillar" Whistler was just too weak for anything of importance to be rested upon him. In other words, nothing could reliably proceed from Whistler. The material concealment, the indirectness of mood, the "tailoring" of Whistler's paintings disqualified him from being an alternative modern point of origin to Meier-Graefe's beloved Manet. Whistler was ultimately a modern "poseur" for Meier-Graefe and "fundamentally an unfrocked Pre-Raphaelite."

Taken in its historical context, Meier-Graefe's critical demolition of British modern art constitutes what was very likely intended as a friendly warning to a national culture he by no means disrespected across the board. Like his friend, the architectural theorist Muthesius, he was at least as much an Anglophile as a Francophile, yet in matters of modern pictorial art there was only France. Meier-Graefe was trying to convince the English no less than his native Germans of this idea, lest they fall prey on one side to the aesthetic Antichrists of Whistler and the Pre-Raphaelites, or to Böcklin on the other.

Meier-Graefe's study, which was translated into English in 1908 (the same year Phythian's book was published), complemented the earlier pro-French "history" of MacColl. Together the two histories provided the basic ideological substance of Roger Fry's monumental mission of bringing the message of French modernist art to Britain. Cézanne, Renoir, and, to a slightly lesser degree, Matisse became the focus of Fry's brilliantly argued critical theory, which featured the primacy of "plastic" relationships and maintained that the deepest aesthetic emotion derives from the comprehension of these relationships. For three decades Fry (together with Clive Bell) spoke eloquently to the British. Some artists listened immediately, like Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant in the Teens, and others, like the members of the Nicholson circle, listened again in the 1930s. But the importance of French art to the majority of twentieth-century British artists was never secure. Most were affected, but few for very long.

Instead, what have come to be characteristic "British School" attitudes filtered into the new century from Whistler, via Sickert in particular. They produced a lasting and cumulative effect that is amply documented by the Royal Academy exhibition. Sickert's circle—including Gilman, Gore, and, to a lesser degree, Smith—flirted for a time with late Impressionist and Post-Impressionist color without ever becoming comfortable with it. In their work, color relationships are frequently moody in the generic sense (rather than being decorative-plastic in the best French sense). Similarly, paint texture was for the Sickert circle an increasingly difficult problem the more distant it got from Whistler's impersonal finesse. Never do color and paint texture cooperate reliably. Only in the mild-mannered efforts of Gwen John or Lawrence Gowing in the Twenties and Thirties does anything like "material" color develop.

In Britain, it seems, from the last third of the nineteenth century onward, color was allowed to go in directions other than painting. First, color and ornament cavorted in the theoretical writings of Owen Jones. Then it was color and music, deployed by keyboard-driven colored light projections in

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the performance and theory of Rimington and then Klein. After its optical and ethical exhaustion in the hands of the first generation of Pre-Raphaelites, color seems never to have settled back into painting. So it was not destined to play a reliable role in twentieth-century British art, except in the sculpture of Anthony Caro, which in the Royal Academy show stands out as a brilliant, almost Michelangelesque, exception to this rule.

Without color and without physically responsive surfaces, what have twentieth-century British artists routinely had to work with? Essentially, they have had mood-evocative tonal refinement deriving, as Robert Rosenblum rightly notes in his catalogue essay, from Whistler, and they have had the photograph, a force already as active in Whistler's work as the much more overt influences of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japanese printmakers. At the risk of oversimplifying, it seems that something like "photo-mania" constitutes the unifying base for British art in this century. A reliance on the narrative, decorative, and pictorial characteristics of the photograph—as both a point of origin and a means of control—seems to echo over the vast range of superficially disparate work shown in the Royal Academy's exhibition.

It is remarkable to read through the text of the exhibition catalogue with an eye to the number of times and the variety of ways that photography—as a working tool or as an image reference—is discussed. From Sickert to Bacon, from Nash and Spencer to Gilbert and George, the photograph appears as a necessary part of the discussion of both form and content. For much of the work of the Sixties and Seventies—that of Hamilton, Blake, Freud, and Kitaj—the photograph functions as a literal motif. For the work of the British Surrealists—that of Burra and Wadsworth—the notion of the "dream photograph" is courted even more persistently than it was by Magritte or Tanguy. Moore's *Shelter Drawings* seem photographic in both their compositional and reportorial character. His sculpture, with its blandly rolling surfaces, recalls monumentalized photographic half-tones in three dimensions.

The photograph effectively distances twentieth-century British art either from nature or from any painting- or sculpture-based processes of image development. The photograph as a complex graphic system, or as a register of smoothly variable half-tone, or as a provocative, pre-visualized condition of narrative, seems to constitute the "deep structure" of modern British pictorial sensibility. Its ability to suggest form and imagery simultaneously strikes some kind of basic chord with still active "British School" notions of what art ought to be about. A dedication to the photograph, whether overt or covert, has effectively kept the national seal on British art, providing it with an insulation against all international currents which do not in some fashion share that dedication. Not surprisingly, the high point of British influence in international developments came in the late 1960s, when pictorial procedures keyed to reproductive processes were the rage everywhere.

Why is the photograph so important to modern British art? The simple answer is that the photograph is a readily available two-dimensional translation of whatever a camera can see (which is almost anything). Tensely sculptural in half-tone, and massively flat in graphic resolution, the photograph speaks to two traditional media in many different ways. Yet the photograph is never just abstract. It is both a thing in itself *and* a conduit to the part of optical and material (and psychological) reality that "sponsors" it. By definition the photograph has a subject-object balance, which British artists at least seem endlessly to enjoy unbalancing and rebalancing as they introduce the photograph directly or indirectly into the complex matrix of a less clearly defined medium like painting or sculpture.

It is doubtful that modern British art would have cast its lot with photography so confidently had not photography performed so brilliantly in British hands in the early

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modern period. The progeny of Cameron and Evans gave about as strong an account of the pictorial and the sculptural potential of photography as anyone did anywhere in the world during the same historical period. Both the aesthetic and semiotic range of black-and-white photography emerged early on and with great force in England. One result has been that "tributes" are constantly paid to photography by other historically less secure media. The surest guarantee of Britishness in this century's art resides, it seems, in this act of "tribute." More than any other medium practiced in Britain, photography has insisted on its material relevance to all forms of inquiry—aesthetic and otherwise—with the greatest confidence, and it possesses a clear body of evidence to back up its claims. Pre-Raphaelite painting established the condition necessary for British photography to proceed, but the child quickly excelled the parent to the point of effectively re-fathering the older medium. Rather like music in its effect on modern German art, photography in Britain after a certain point dictated the pace, character, and feeling of British art as a whole.

A photo-dominated artistic situation similar to the British one might well have emerged in America during the first two decades of the twentieth century, but it did not. Most of the credit for preventing such a photographic dominance must go to Alfred Stieglitz, who believed so deeply in his medium that he wanted nothing more for it (and nothing less) than a share in the rich historical and contemporary texture of the traditionally major media of painting and sculpture. What Stieglitz did was to make photography "accompany" the major media from an interested but respectful distance; he hoped thereby to guarantee the aesthetic authenticity of the practices and effects of this most junior member of the high arts. Stieglitz was primarily interested in advancing photography as a particular form of artistic enterprise, related to, yet different from, all others. Relationships and differences were what Stieglitz and his circle rightly tried to sort out. It never occurred to them to approach what they did as a potentially self-sufficient substitute for the still vital activity of American and Continental painting and sculpture. British photography developed *without* any sense of extra-media vitality, and it managed ultimately through its own considerable achievements to constitute the source for whatever aesthetic vitality might develop in the plastic arts in Britain.

Arguably, this vitality has begun to wear pretty thin in modern British art. One comes away from the Royal Academy show feeling that Dorian's portrait has not only become grey with age but has very nearly disappeared.

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John Fowles and his big ideas

by Bruce Bawer

Contemporary English novels, as a rule, are modest things—modest in their themes, their manner, their physical dimensions. If many an American, Continental, or Latin American novelist attempts, in each new book, to embody a startlingly original vision, to be formally innovative, to stage a linguistic fireworks display, and to make major statements about love, death, history, the nature of reality, man's life in society, and the function of art, the typical postwar English novelist seeks rather to relate a relatively unambitious story about the subtle pains and pleasures of a single unremarkable life. The characteristic virtues of the postwar English novel, accordingly, have been its exquisite restraint and delicacy of nuance, its ability to convey the significance of everyday reality, the simple beauty of even the most prosaic human soul.

For the past quarter century or so, the major exception to this rule has been John Fowles. He is the author of six novels—*The Collector, The Magus, The French Lieutenant's Woman, Daniel Martin, Mantissa,* and *A Maggot*—as well as of a poetry collection (*Poems*), a volume of short stories (*The Ebony Tower*), a philosophical treatise (*The Aristos*),[1] and the texts of numerous books of photographs. Though his novels are strikingly different from one another in plot and setting (and even exhibit an unusual variety of style and form), they are all strange and provocative, and—most important—share at bottom a consonance of theme and situation. "My chief concern," Fowles writes in his preface to the 1968 edition of *The Aristos,* "is to preserve the freedom of the individual against all those pressures-to-conform that threaten our century." Elsewhere he has been quoted as saying that the major theme of his work is "[f]reedom . . . . How you can achieve freedom. That obsesses me. All my books are about that."

But Fowles is also concerned with a number of other, related themes. The words *mystery* and *passion,* for instance, recur in his fiction, and time and again they are associated with escape from the confinement and conformity of civilization to the instructive "wild innocence" of some Edenic locale, usually a wood (from which, inevitably, Fowles's escapists must return to society to apply what they have learned to the conditions of life and love in the real world). Fowles's principal characters are usually confused and isolated men who are attracted to intelligent and spirited women; his novels are often constructed like Chinese boxes, with one mystery leading into another, one apparent epiphany giving way to another, and an expected sexual consummation interminably postponed; their climaxes often involve the male protagonist being forced to confront long-hidden truths, to make difficult judgments, and to alter himself in some

1 All of these titles were published by Little, Brown with the exception of *Poems,* which was published by Ecco Press.

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profound manner. References to specific paintings, and to mirrors, fill Fowles's novels. So do references to certain antitheses, among them innocence and experience, nature and civilization, the Victorian and the modern, paradise and prison, order and chaos, determinism and free will, action and impotence, duty and desire, possession and enjoyment, life and art, reality and illusion, history and fiction, the Many and the Few, the English and the foreign. Fowles possesses a mind that is at once didactic and dialectical; though he is almost constantly pressing some idea or another upon the reader, and holds certain beliefs very strongly—for example, that suffering is evil, and that possession should not be the purpose of life—he is sometimes not easy to pin down. Frequently he strikes one as congenitally self-contradictory; perhaps the most accurate way to put it is to say that, at his best, he is less interested in baldly promulgating ideas than in probing them, exploring them as if they were characters. He is at his weakest when he flat-out sermonizes and when he probes an idea to death, as he does at some point or another in each of his books. Thus Fowles's novels—though consistently elegant in their style—are by turns mesmerizing and tiresome, brilliant and inane; one is capable of finding his intellectual gamesmanship exhilarating on one page, infuriating on the next, and boring on the page after that. If at times, then, his love of ideas seems a definite asset, at other times—namely, when he allows it to undermine his narrative, and to obscure his very considerable gifts for language and storytelling and his innate sense of human character—his philosophical promiscuity seems by far his greatest liability.

On the subject of political philosophy, in particular, Fowles appears to contain multitudes. Like many Oxbridgeans (he was graduated from Oxford University in 1950), he manages to be both an elitist snob and a "democratic socialist"; also, he is at once an idealist and a relativist, a male chauvinist and a self-proclaimed feminist. But most of the time he does not come across as an extremist of any sort; on the contrary, when he is not being fervidly didactic, the Fowles of the novels and stories generally impresses one as a good Jeffersonian democrat who is honest enough to admit that the highest achievements of any civilized society are the work of an intelligent and gifted minority. Likewise, though he calls himself an existentialist and preaches on the subject every so often, his brand of existentialism seems much more palatable—because more sensible, moderate, intelligent, and humane—than most. He distinguishes, for example, between existential freedom and indulgence in escapist fantasy; indeed, most of his fiction is concerned, in large part, with drawing a clear distinction between the two.

In early February, American television viewers were provided with an introduction to Fowles in the form of an hour-long British dramatization of his 1974 novella "The Ebony Tower." The program—directed by Robert Knights and written by John Mortimer—was a presentation of the PBS *Great Performances* series. This novella may well be the best possible point of entry into the world according to Fowles. It offers both a representative example of his fictional method and a précis of his major philosophical interests; it also illustrates the gracefulness of his prose and the foolish didacticism into which he so often wanders. Fowles tells the story of a two-day visit by David Williams, an up-and-coming young English abstract painter and art critic, to Coëtminais ("monks' woods"), the rural French *manoir* of Henry Breasley, a legendary seventy-seven-year-old representational artist—and a notorious womanizer and bohemian—who has spent most of his life in self-exile from England. An English publisher is planning a volume of Breasley's work, and David, to his surprise, has been recommended by Breasley to supply the introduction; he has come to Coëtminais, which is located in the heart of a dense wood, to meet the great man for the first time and to interview him for the book.

In its focus upon youth and age and the artist's vocation, as well as in its wistful tone

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and atmosphere of mystery, "The Ebony Tower" is rather reminiscent of *Cakes and Ale, The Ghost Writer,* and other such works. (It also recalls *The Aspern Papers.*) As in Maugham's and Roth's novels, it is in the contrast—and the subtle conflict—between the young artist and the old that much of the story's drama resides. Thirty-one-year-old David, who counts Braque, De Stijl, and Ben Nicholson among his influences, is a confirmed abstractionist; Breasley, whose house is full of Bonnards, Dufys, and Ensors, and whose own darkly sensuous canvases are in the direct line of descent from Uccello and Goya, considers abstraction the "[g]reatest betrayal in the history of art." As "Mouse," one of two enticing young women who live at Coëtminais and attend to Breasley's sexual and professional needs, explains to David, "Henry feels that full abstraction represents a flight from human and social responsibility." Or, as Breasley himself puts it, art should have "balls"—humanity, sensuousness—and abstract art doesn't; it represents the "triumph of the bloody eunuch," of "traitors" more concerned with "fundamentals" than "fundaments"—i.e., human bodies, sex organs. Breasley: "That's reality. Not your piddling little theorems and pansy colors. I know what you people are after, Williams. You're afraid of the human body." David: "Perhaps simply more interested in the mind than the genitals." Breasley: "God help your bloody wife then." Breasley sums up the whole phenomenon of abstract art in a single image: the ebony tower. As "Mouse" explains, the phrase refers to "[a]nything he doesn't like about modern art. That he thinks is obscure because the artist is scared to be clear." Fowles's characterization of the two men makes it obvious that he endorses Breasley's view of things: David is quintessentially English, an extremely reserved, proper young man who, as we learn at the story's end, is tragically repressed; Breasley, even in his declining years, is randy, outrageous, full of life, and marvelously capable of enjoying it.

But modern art is not the only subject of conflict between David and Breasley. There is also "Mouse," whose real name is Diana, and who proves to be a very fine artist and an admirer of David's work; looking over her drawings, David finds the representational ones rather cold and unoriginal—inferior imitations of Breasley—but finds the abstract drawings (which remind him of his own work) magnificent. He quickly develops a romantic attachment to her, and the feeling is mutual. Far from being the cold-blooded young tart he had first assumed her to be, Diana turns out to be shy, relatively inexperienced, and afraid of returning to the world outside Coëtminais. For her, the *manoir* has become at once a sensual paradise, where she can swim and sunbathe and frolic in the glorious altogether, and a monastic retreat where she can feel like a nun, free of the vulgar carnality of the outside world and "the effort of getting to know people." When David learns that Breasley has proposed marriage to her, and that she is considering the offer, he is shocked; left alone with her on the night before his departure, David (who is married) asks her to sleep with him, but she refuses. He senses that if he presses her, she will give in. But he doesn't press her, and she retires, leaving him alone with his regrets—upon which Fowles elaborates in a passage that is (to say the least) hyperbolic and unconvincing:

> He turned into his room [writes Fowles] and stood in its blackness in a rage of lost chance; made out his faint shape there in the old gilt-framed mirror. A ghost, a no-man. The horror was that he was still being plunged forward, still melting, still realizing; as there are rare psychic phenomena read of, imagined, yet missed when they finally happen. To one part of him—already desperate to diminish, to devaluate—it was merely a perverse refusal; and to another, an acute and overwhelming sense of loss, of being cleft, struck down, endlessly deprived . . . and deceived. He wanted with all his being—now it was too late; was seared unendurably by something that did not exist, racked by an emotion as extinct as the dodo. Even as he stood there he knew it was a far more than sexual experience, but a frag-

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> ment of one that reversed all logic, process, that struck new suns, new evolutions, new universes out of nothingness. It was metaphysical: something far beyond the girl; an anguish, a being bereft of a freedom whose true nature he had only just seen.
>
> For the first time in his life he knew more than the fact of being; but the passion to exist.

The last five pages or so of the novella constitute a feverish and repetitious account of David's new realization about himself in the wake of his visit to Coëtminais. It is simply that he, unlike Breasley, has "a fear of challenge," a fear manifested in his attitude toward both art and sex. "One killed all risk, one refused all challenge, and so one became an artificial man." To Fowles, it is the lesson of art, not sex, that is patently more important at the end of the story: David's refusal to seduce Diana and to rescue her from Breasley is ultimately only a metaphor for his refusal to take the "existential chance" in his art the way Breasley does; his returning to his wife is only a metaphor for the "settled-for-the-safe" choice of abstractionism. "Coët had been a mirror," Fowles writes, a mirror wherein David, a captive of the ebony tower, had been allowed a view of "the old green freedom," "a glimpse of his lost true self." Yet David knows that this insight will not change him.

> . . . he would go on painting as before, he would forget this day, he would find reasons to interpret everything differently, as a transient losing his head, a self-indulgent folly. A scar would grow over it, then fade away, and the skin would be as if there had never been a wound. He was crippled by common sense, he had no ultimate belief in chance and its exploitation, the missed opportunity would become the finally sensible decision, the decent thing; the flame of deep fire that had singed him a dream, a moment's illusion; her reality just one more unpursued idea kept among old sketchbooks at the back of a studio cupboard.

It hardly needs to be said that for a writer who is foursquare against abstractionism in art, the hyperbolic ending of "The Ebony Tower" provides an astonishing example of literary abstraction and generalization gone haywire. It is difficult to see why anyone would consider this novella good material for a television program. After all, the story makes no sense without the two crucial passages from which I have quoted—the one in which David, for the first time in his life, knows "the passion to exist," and the concluding rant on abstract art—and it is not easy to imagine either of these passages being made dramatically effective. Even if it were possible to dramatize them, the novella would still have what is, to my mind, a critical structural flaw: namely, that one never has so much as a clue, before the story's climax, that David has never known "the passion to exist," or that his commitment to art is so shallow. Besides, can his marriage possibly be so loveless and banal that a stranger is capable, in the course of a weekend, of leading him to an emotional epiphany that he has never experienced in his thirty-one years? But then, Fowles is less interested here in telling a wholly believable realistic story than in presenting a parable.

John Mortimer and Robert Knights, the writer and director of the television adaptation of "The Ebony Tower," have avoided some of the story's inherent problems by focusing, at the denouement, on sex rather than art—by letting David's inability to take risks in his art function as a metaphor for his inability to take risks in his personal life, rather than the other way around. To be sure, some of David's final reflections on the hollowness of his vocation crop up, in slightly altered form, as lines of dialogue at various points in the film. For example, his recognition that he has been playing it safe by being an abstractionist becomes a line of dialogue spoken by Breasley (played by Laurence Olivier): "Don't be so *safe,* dear boy." And David's characterization of Coëtminais as a mirror becomes, in the film, a line spoken by Diana (Greta Scacchi) to David (Roger Rees) about Breasley: "He's like a mirror. You see exactly who you are—he cuts all your clever little triumphs down to scale."

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But most of David's closing thoughts are scuttled by the producers, and the film, rather than ending with his feeble proposition to Diana, his introduction to "the passion to exist," and his sudden tragic awareness of his "fear of challenge," concludes with a series of brief scenes in which David —momentarily, at least—shakes off that fear. In the film, he offers Diana not only an evening of sex but an alternative to life with Breasley; apparently willing to desert his wife for her, he begs Diana to leave Coëtminais with him. She refuses. He then takes on Breasley, accuses him of being terrified of age and of change, of wanting "to marry Diana so that you can keep her here in chains." An unruffled Breasley entreats him to look closely at Pisanello's *St. George and the Princess* next time he visits the National Gallery. "The princess has got the dragon on a lead—her pet, her tame companion": Saint George, the would-be rescuer, is only making a fool of himself. At the fade-out, then, the television version of "The Ebony Tower" is not about the reasons for a young man's devotion to abstract art but about a young woman's unwillingness to leave an elderly artist to whom she is passionately devoted.

The film's shift of emphasis from art to sex works surprisingly well. But many of the smaller changes in the script are less effective. For some reason, John Mortimer has added some awfully stale lines. When Diana first compliments David, he says, "Flattery will get you everywhere"; when Breasley's forward manner stuns David into silence, the old man asks, "Cat got your tongue?"; and when David confronts Breasley about Diana, he says, "She has to lead her own life" and "Being a genius doesn't give you the right to ruin someone else's life." None of these lines appears in the novella. The casting is problematical, too: the viewer is plainly supposed to sympathize with David, to hope that he will overcome his priggery, throw caution to the winds, and leave Coëtminais with Diana in his arms. But Olivier's Breasley is so winning, and Roger Rees's David so utterly smug, humorless, and uncharismatic, that one finds oneself wanting Rees to get out of there as quickly as possible and to leave Lord Olivier and his women to their devices.

To follow a reading of "The Ebony Tower" (or even a viewing of the television adaptation) with a brief perusal of *The Aristos* (1965) is to recognize how many of Fowles's chief philosophical notions figure in the novella—as they do, I might add, throughout his works. *The Aristos,* originally subtitled "A Self-Portrait in Ideas," consists of several hundred related axioms which are organized into eleven chapters with titles like "The Universal Situation," "The Tensional Nature of Human Reality," and "The Importance of Art." The axioms, some of which consist of a single sentence and only one of which occupies so much as an entire page, are numbered chapter by chapter, like verses of the Bible. The book is nothing less than Fowles's answer to Plato's *Republic*—it represents his notion of what ideas on life, death, art, religion, politics, science, economics, education, and sex should govern a world run by superior men and women. And indeed his primary concern is with the superior individual, the *aristos.* The word is borrowed from Heraclitus, who, Fowles reminds us, "saw mankind divided into a moral and intellectual *élite* (the *aristoi,* the good ones, *not*—this is a later sense—the ones of noble birth) and an unthinking conforming mass—*hoi polloi,* the many." Fowles notes that Heraclitus has been condemned as "the grandfather of modern totalitarianism," but insists that

> in every field of human endeavour it is obvious that most of the achievements, most of the great steps forward, have come from individuals—whether they be scientific or artistic geniuses, saints, revolutionaries, what you will. And we do not need the evidence of intelligence testing to know conversely that the vast mass of mankind are not highly intelligent—or highly moral, or highly gifted artistically, or indeed highly qualified to carry out any of the nobler human activities.

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Fowles thus divides mankind into two groups, the Few and the Many. Nonetheless he declares himself to be a socialist: "All my adult life I have believed that the only rational political doctrine one can hold is democratic socialism." His way of reconciling these two disparate views is to say that "*the dividing line between the Few and the Many must run through each individual, not between individuals.* In short, none of us are wholly perfect; and none wholly imperfect." Or, as he puts it at the end of the book, "We are all sometimes of the Many." If this is true, however, then why posit a "Few" and a "Many" in the first place?[2]

Fowles sees life in terms of process: to him, everything is ultimately unknowable, indefinite, mysterious. But, though we will never reach perfection of any kind, we can nonetheless strive for it ("We build towards nothing; we build"—1.33). And it is this endless striving that makes life worth living. "Our universe is the best possible because it can contain no Promised Land; no point where we could have all we imagine. We are designed to want: with nothing to want, we are like windmills in a world without wind" (1.34). What human beings need most of all in such a universe—and what David Williams so tragically lacks in "The Ebony Tower"—is freedom of will. It is "the highest human good" (1.64); to be true *aristoi,* men and women must overcome the "asphyxiating smog of opinions foisted on them by society," which forces ordinary people to "lose all independence of judgement, and all freedom of action" and to "see themselves increasingly . . . as parts of a machine" (3.29). We must, in short, commit existential acts—existentialism signifying, by his definition, "the revolt of the individual against all those systems of thought, theories of psychology, and social and political pressures that attempt to rob him of his individuality" (7.74). Fowles is not inciting mass revolution, though, for "existentialism is conspicuously unsuited to political or social subversion, since it is incapable of organized dogmatic resistance or formulations of resistance. It is capable only of one man's resistance; one personal expression of view; such as this book" (7.79). Fowles insists, moreover, on the importance of moral judgment, proclaiming that "[o]ur function is to judge, to choose between good and evil. If we refuse to do so, we cease to be human beings and revert to our basic state, of being matter" (5.45). As for risks, we need to take them in order to improve our lives and ourselves. "The purpose of hazard is to force us, and the rest of matter, to evolve" (2.61).

As "The Ebony Tower" demonstrates, the sort of freedom that usually figures most prominently in Fowles's fiction is sexual freedom. Fowles has a good deal to say about this subject in *The Aristos.* He speaks of the twentieth-century emergence of sex "from behind the curtains and crinolines of Victorian modesty and propriety" (9.97) and finds it necessary to say that "[s]exual attraction and the sexual act are in themselves innocent, neither intrinsically moral nor immoral. Sex is like all great forces: simply a force" (9.105). One has the feeling, after reading through Fowles's oeuvre, that his obsession with freedom has a great deal to do with his complicated feelings about sex; he often seems to be taking on an enemy—namely, the stifling sexual morality of the Victorian period—that no longer exists. Indeed, he has made reference, in several of his novels, to the Victorian notions of morality with which people of his generation were raised. "My contemporaries," notes the Fowles-like narrator of *Daniel Martin,* "were all brought up in some degree of the nineteenth century, since the twentieth did not begin till 1945."

A concept that is of central importance to Fowles is that of the "nemo," which Fowles defines as "a man's sense of his own futility and ephemerality; of his relativity, his comparativeness; of his virtual nothingness" (3.7). Fowles says that it is art, above all else, that "best conquers time, and therefore the nemo"; an art object is "as nearly immortal

2 That Fowles still maintains these two contrary positions is made clear in an interview that appears in the Spring 1987 issue of *Boulevard.*

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as an object in a cosmos without immortality can be." Fowles devotes much of his chapter on art to a description of the situation of the modern artist—a situation that, for all his criticism of Victorian vis-à-vis modern culture, he is not at all happy with. He deplores, for instance, "the tyranny of self-expression" (10.35); the narrowing of the artist's audience to "a literate few" (10.51); and the pressure on the artist to present "a mirror to the world around him" (10.36). He is disturbed by the rise of a type of intellectual that is interested mainly in "colour, shape, texture, pattern, setting, movement," rather than in "the properly intellectual (moral and socio-political) significance of events and objects"—more interested, in short, in style than in content, which to him is the single most woeful symptom of the modern temperament.

What *The Aristos* essentially amounts to, then, is a collection of opinions, some of which one agrees with, some of which one doesn't; there is much in it that is intelligent and thought-provoking, and much that is silly and wrongheaded. Fowles is often guilty of sentimental overgeneralization; in distinguishing between the craftsman and the genius, he says that the former "is very concerned with his contemporary success, his market value," while the latter "is indifferent to contemporary success." And Fowles can be unintentionally amusing when he is pretending to be objective about things that are close to him. For example, having decided that mankind should have a universal language, he arrives, by way of an elaborate and (he thinks) purely logical argument, at the conclusion that the language of choice should be—guess what?—English. Likewise, this man who chooses to identify himself at the beginning of the book as "a poet first; and then a scientist," determines—by means of an equally sophisticated and objective bit of dialectic—that "the great arts" are not equal, and that "[l]iterature, in particular poetry," is of all the arts "the most essential and the most valuable."

Despite such weaknesses, however, one cannot help but admire Fowles for his intellectual seriousness, his acute sense of the artist's dignity as well as of his moral and social responsibility, and his attempt to express and to codify his way of seeing the world. It is rare and admirable for a contemporary British or American novelist to be as intensely and seriously concerned as John Fowles is with the relations between art and ideas, art and morality. But *The Aristos* is chiefly of interest not as a work of philosophy but as a *catalogue raisonné,* as it were, of many of the thematic preoccupations of Fowles's fiction.

The first of Fowles's novels, *The Collector* (1963), is in some ways the most uncharacteristic of his books—straightforward, lucid, and relatively short. The collector is a lower-class young English orphan named Ferdinand Clegg who, after striking it rich in the lottery, quits his job, kidnaps a beautiful young middle-class art student named Miranda whom he has long admired from afar, and locks her in his basement. In the first half of the book, Clegg narrates the story of her seven-week imprisonment; the second half consists of the diary that Miranda keeps during her ordeal. The book's title derives from the fact that Clegg is a butterfly collector; he has what Fowles thinks of as the collector's mentality, and comes in for much criticism from Miranda on this score: "I hate people who collect things, and classify things and give them names and then forget all about them. That's what people are always doing in art. They call a painter an impressionist or a cubist or something and then they put him in a drawer and don't see him as a living individual painter any more." "I know what I am," she writes. "A butterfly he has always wanted to catch."

The irony is that once Clegg has caught Miranda, he doesn't know what to do with her. He won't have sex with her, because he thinks that's dirty. Miranda needles him about that, too:

> You're the most beautiful specimen of petit bourgeois squareness I've ever met . . . . You despise the real bourgeois classes for all their

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> snobbishness and their snobbish voices and ways . . . . Did you know that every great thing in the history of art and every beautiful thing in life is actually what you call nasty or has been caused by feelings you would call nasty? By passion, by love, by hatred, by truth . . . . Why do you take all the life out of life? Why do you kill all the beauty?

Later in the story, Miranda cuddles up to Clegg; her purpose, as she explains to him (in a variation on axiom 9.105), is "to show you that sex—sex is just an activity, like anything else. It's not dirty, it's just two people playing with each other's bodies. Like dancing. Like a game." But Clegg doesn't understand; all he can see is that Miranda is a filthy-minded little trollop, not at all the nice girl he thought her to be.

The problem with Clegg, Fowles wants to convince us, is not that he's a screwball; on the contrary, as Miranda observes, he's "ordinary"—stupid, sluggish, unimaginative. Indeed, "he's so ordinary that he's extraordinary." Miranda spells it out to Clegg: "Everything free and decent in life is being locked away in filthy little cellars by beastly people who don't care." For Miranda, as she herself realizes, is a "special person," a budding *aristos* (though she doesn't use the word); she knows that "I am intelligent . . . that I am beginning to understand life much better than most people of my age." She wants not "to be clever or great or 'significant' or given all that clumsy masculine analysis," but rather "to *make* beauty," to paint the "essences" of things, "[n]ot the things themselves." In case we don't get the idea of all this, Fowles explains it in his 1968 preface to *The Aristos*: "My purpose in *The Collector* was to attempt to analyse, through a parable, some of the results of this confrontation [between the Few and the Many]." In kidnapping Miranda, Clegg commits an evil, "but I tried to show that his evil was largely, perhaps wholly, the result of a bad education, a mean environment, being orphaned: all factors over which he had no control." Thus he stands not only for the evil of the Many but for "the virtual *innocence* of the Many." Miranda is also the product of her environment: "she had well-to-do parents, good educational opportunity, inherited aptitude and intelligence."

Though *The Collector* is quite a powerful thriller, it doesn't work at all as a parable about the Few and the Many. For one thing, Miranda, with her forthright little opinions and her snobbish attitude toward ordinary people, is very unsympathetic. Fowles admits as much in his *Aristos* preface: she is "arrogant in her ideas, a prig, a liberal-humanist snob . . . . Yet . . . she might have become something better, the kind of being humanity so desperately needs." But to my mind there is little indication, in *The Collector,* that Miranda is anything more than just another spoiled and obnoxious art-school type. As for Clegg, it is impossible to think of him as an "ordinary man." Ordinary men don't kidnap girls and lock them in cellars. Not that Clegg is an unconvincing character; on the contrary, Fowles's portrait of him is chillingly believable. Certainly it is possible to imagine a character—particularly an emotionally disturbed kidnapper of young women—who is so antipathetic to sex and so unfamiliar with sexual passion. (In this regard, of course, Clegg is similar to David Williams of "The Ebony Tower.") But how can Fowles possibly use such a figure as a symbol of the ordinary man? It simply doesn't wash. And it's offensive, as well: does Fowles really think that somewhere in every working-class soul there lurks a desperately sick kidnapper? Does he really think that human evil is primarily the result of "poor education" and "mean environment," and that aptitude and intelligence are to be found exclusively, or even primarily, in the privileged classes? Furthermore, the second half of the book is a good deal weaker than the first—partly because Clegg is a more interesting character than Miranda, partly because the first half is relatively free of symbol-mongering, and partly because the second half forces us to go over ground we've already covered. But—to put it mildly—Fowles has never worried overmuch about seeming redundant.

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The Magus (1965) is as long and expansive as *The Collector* is short and claustrophobic. Like Ferdinand Clegg, Nicholas Urfe, the narrator and protagonist of *The Magus,* is an *isolato,* an orphaned young man with time on his hands. Though Nicholas, unlike Clegg, is an Oxford graduate and a self-styled poet with a good deal of sexual experience, he shares Clegg's emotional detachment; he sees love as an ephemeral thing, and likes it that way. "You've built your life so that nothing could ever reach you," complains his latest lover, Alison Kelly, an Australian stewardess who genuinely loves him. Nicholas sees himself as a lone wolf, a rebel. Disgusted with the "mass-produced middle-class boys" that he is forced to teach in an undistinguished East Anglian public school, Nicholas decides in the spring of 1953 to leave smug, predictable old England—and Alison—for a year's stint at the Lord Byron School on the Greek island of Phraxos. (The school is based upon Anargyrios College on the island of Spetsai, where Fowles taught in 1951 and met his wife, Elizabeth.) Once there, feeling alone and directionless, Nicholas prepares to kill himself, but does not; he lacks the freedom of will to do so, and realizes that he is, "in existentialist terms, unauthentic. I knew I would never kill myself, I knew I would always want to go on living with myself, however hollow I became, however diseased."

It is then that Nicholas is drawn to Bourani, a wooded estate which is inhabited by a highly cultured and strongly opinionated old man named Maurice Conchis. The house is full of Modiglianis, Rodins, Giacomettis, and the like; Conchis—who will prove to be the magus (magician, sorcerer) of the title—is full of views on art, history, and society. He sounds as if he's memorized *The Aristos*: he hates collecting, believes that "destiny is hazard" and "[l]ife is an eternal wanting more," divides mankind into "the many" and "the few" (or "the elect"), proclaims the essential isolation of each individual, and rhapsodizes about "the passion to exist." During one of Nicholas's weekend visits, Conchis hypnotizes him into a state of mind wherein (as Nicholas explains in a feverish eight-hundred-word passage reminiscent of "The Ebony Tower") he is intensely "aware of existing," aware "that reality [is] endless interaction," aware that there is "no meaning, only being." Suddenly, the "endless solitude of the one, its total enislement from all else, [seems] the same thing as the total interrelationship of all," and he is possessed of an "enormous and vertiginous sense of the innumerability of the universe; an innumerability in which transience and unchangingness [seem] integral, essential and uncontradictory."

Odd things begin to happen. Exotic figures —Greek gods one weekend, Nazi soldiers the next—appear on the grounds at Bourani, enacting a pagan masque of sorts with an extremely baffled Nicholas as both actor and audience. One of the players is Lily, an innocent and beautiful young Englishwoman who claims to be Conchis's long-dead love. Conchis tells Nicholas that she's a schizophrenic; she confides to Nicholas that she's an actress named Julie Holmes who has been hired by Conchis to play Lily. (Is this getting complicated enough?) Nicholas and Julie fall in love—which, she tells him, is precisely what Conchis wants: he's conducting an "experiment in mystification" and is leading Nicholas into "a . . . sort of trap." And so he is. When Nicholas takes Julie to a hotel room to consummate their love, she flings the door open at the last minute, crying, "There is no Julie," and admits Conchis and two members of his repertory company, who subdue and narcotize Nicholas. Several days later he is led into a courtroom where Conchis, Julie, and other actors from the masque identify themselves as experimental psychologists, explain to Nicholas that he has been the subject of some behavioral research, and proceed (in a very funny episode) to read their humiliating, jargon-ridden "analyses" of his personality. After refusing the opportunity to whip Julie (who now identifies herself as Dr. Vanessa Maxwell), Nicholas is taken to a room to watch her perform a live sex act with a huge black man. Conchis then tells a totally humiliated

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Nicholas that he has made it into the "elect," and sets him free. "Intolerably alone," Nicholas returns to England. There—after several months of reflection, and a few more twists of Conchis's plot, which he learns is called "the godgame"—he again faces Alison. Fowles leaves open the question of whether they are reunited.[3]

Of course, the story of *The Magus* is completely ludicrous; as with *The Collector,* Fowles means the book to be read as an allegory, a lesson in love and in the proper uses of freedom. But what is the lesson? What has Nicholas learned from his harrowing experience at the hands of Conchis and company; what has happened to earn him entry into the elite? The answer, presumably, is that, having been made to recognize Lily/Julie as an unrealistic projection of his own childish fantasies (fantasies not unlike Ferdinand Clegg's illusions about Miranda), Nicholas has learned to love, and to accept love from, a real woman like Alison. Allegory or not, however, there is much about the novel that is truly disturbing. With every new twist in Conchis's systematic humiliation of Nicholas, one finds oneself saying, "This is *sick.*" Yes, the story is absurd, but one's awareness of its absurdity does not prevent one from being outraged all the same by the cruel and unusual punishments, both emotional and physical, that Conchis devises for Nicholas. These acts would seem unwarranted and indefensible whatever their purpose, but since Conchis's aim is apparently to teach Nicholas a lesson about love and freedom, they come across as particularly horrible. There is something tyrannical about Conchis's assumption that he has a right to change Nicholas, to brainwash him into his own way of seeing things. For this is what *The Magus* amounts to: the fantastic story of a brainwashing.

The more one thinks about it, the more Ferdinand Clegg and Maurice Conchis, the title figures of Fowles's first two novels, seem two of a kind. Though to Fowles there is indubitably a great difference between them—Clegg is an agent of evil, Conchis an agent of good—both are sadists, tyrants, god-players. And so, in his own way, is Fowles. Reading *The Collector,* one sometimes feels like a prisoner oneself, with Fowles as the jailer; reading *The Magus,* one finds oneself identifying with Nicholas Urfe's confusion and helplessness, and begins to regard Fowles with the same paradoxical combination of wonder, resentment, respect, and hostility with which Nicholas regards Conchis. *The Magus* is, indeed, largely about the author as magus; Fowles is, in a sense, Maurice Conchis, and every reader of *The Magus* is Nicholas Urfe, being led through the paces of the godgame toward enlightenment—or Fowles's version of it, anyway.

Fowles's finest novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), is set in the late 1860s, primarily in the Dorset coastal town of Lyme Regis (in which Fowles has lived since 1966). The protagonist is Charles Smithson, a thirty-two-year-old London gentleman who, like Nicholas Urfe, is an "intelligent idler" (he collects sand dollars), a self-styled poet, and a man of the world; like Nicholas, Charles finds "English society too hidebound, English solemnity too solemn, English thought too moralistic, English religion too bigoted." Though engaged to marry the conventional Ernestina Freeman, Charles finds himself drawn to a mysterious young woman named Sarah Woodruff, whom he first glimpses at the gray, windy seaside while he and Ernestina are in Lyme Regis visiting her aunt. Sarah, a creature of "passion and imagination" who surprises Charles by speaking to him as if she were his intellectual equal, is notorious for her recent scandalous affair with a French lieutenant who, it is said, promised to marry her, took her virtue, and ran away; instead of attempting to make a new life for herself in another part of the country, Sarah has chosen to stay in Lyme Regis—where she is known to everyone as "the French lieutenant's whore"—

3 In an extensively revised edition of *The Magus,* published in Britain in 1977 and in America a year later, Fowles made Nicholas and Alison's chances for happiness at the end a bit brighter.

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and to live with the severely proper Mrs. Poulteney, to whom Sarah is little more than the embodiment of terrible carnal sin. Why has she chosen such a life? Desperate to explain her position to someone who will understand, Sarah persuades Charles to meet her secretly in a large wood (and a lovers' rendezvous) called the Ware Commons; there she explains that remaining in Lyme Regis and moving in with Mrs. Poulteney was "a kind of suicide," an "act of despair" which she performed in order to avoid literally killing herself.

On the advice of Charles, who has fallen in love with her, Sarah moves to Exeter; soon afterward, while journeying from London to Lyme Regis, he makes a monumental decision: he will stop in Exeter and spend the night with her. The "moment of choice" (as Fowles calls it) excites him enormously. "He had not the benefit of existential terminology," writes Fowles; "but what he felt was really a very clear case of the anxiety of freedom—that is, the realization that one *is* free and the realization that being free is a situation of terror." Charles also experiences anxiety when, after taking Sarah to bed, he discovers that he has stolen her virginity. Unable to comprehend why she has posed as a fallen woman—or why she has slept with him, an engaged man—Charles speaks to an enlightened doctor, who presents him with a French book of case histories in sexual hysteria. Charles is shocked; the book opens his eyes to a whole world of "perversions" ("and in the pure and sacred sex"!) whose existence the repressed and hypocritical Victorian age could not so much as acknowledge. What Charles has been confronted with in Sarah is the modern era, with its sexual openness, sexual equality, and freedom—an era whose fundamental assumptions and characteristic attitudes were just beginning to emerge at the time of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The modern era is also, to Fowles, that of the existential man, and Fowles's novel is, in essence, the story of the gradual emergence of the existential man—the man of passion and freedom and "existentialist terror"—that has been hidden behind Charles Smithson's proper Victorian façade.

To be sure, Fowles does not paint the contrast between the Victorian and the modern in black and white; *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a dialectical novel, an attempt to see both worlds more clearly, to understand them more fully, and to condemn neither outright. It should not come as a surprise that in some respects Fowles finds the Victorian age far more congenial than our own. It was, for instance, "a world without the tyranny of specialization"; it was also a world without the tyranny of the Many, a world in which the elect still held their own against the *hoi polloi*. But the modern world was on its way, and majority rule with it; just as Sarah gives Charles a foretaste of modern sexual equality, so his would-be father-in-law Mr. Freeman, and Charles's servant Sam, give him a foretaste of modern equality of the classes. What Mr. Freeman does is to suggest that Charles go into business with him; Charles decides to reject the offer, and Fowles wants us to admire him for it. "To be sure," Fowles admits, "there was something base in his rejection—a mere snobbism."

> But there was one noble element in his rejection: a sense that the pursuit of money was an insufficient purpose in life . . . . [H]e gained a queer sort of momentary self-respect in his nothingness, a sense that choosing to be nothing . . . was the last saving grace of a gentleman; his last freedom, almost.

Fowles admires Charles for feeling this way, and for feeling that if he ever sets foot in Mr. Freeman's store he is "done for"; Fowles explains that "every culture, however undemocratic, or however egalitarian, needs a kind of self-questioning, ethical elite" that rejects "the notion of *possession* as the purpose of life." Apparently to Fowles's way of thinking it's all right to *possess,* the way Charles does; it's just not all right to *want* to possess.

At any rate, it is Mr. Freeman's unseemly offer, in part, that prompts Charles—who is

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beginning to realize that Ernestina may not be right for him—to spend the night in Exeter. And it is Sam's urge to possess that plays the key role in the next twist of the novel's plot. Charles, after his night with Sarah, hands Sam a letter to take to her, explaining that he will break off his engagement and marry her; but Sam, wanting Charles to marry Ernestina (whose father can help get Sam started in business), does not deliver it. Consequently, when Charles returns to Exeter for Sarah she is gone; and it is not until almost two years later that Charles finds her. He discovers that Sarah has become a "New Woman," a member of the bohemian Rossetti circle—which, like Coëtminais and Bourani, is "a community of honorable endeavor, of noble purpose." But she shows him no affection, remarking coolly that she treasures her independence too much to marry anyone. She has become the complete modern woman, "a spirit prepared to sacrifice everything but itself—ready to surrender truth, feeling, perhaps even all womanly modesty in order to save its own integrity." Charles perceives his superiority to her, a superiority "not of birth or education, not of intelligence, not of sex, but of an ability to give that was also an inability to compromise." Charles is truly free; Sarah, unwilling to take risks or to love, is not.

The French Lieutenant's Woman is a wonderful cross between a Victorian and a modern novel, and its effectiveness is doubtless due in large part to Fowles's obvious sympathy with the period. For once his delight in moral and philosophical generalization does not feel at all out of place; after all, the practice of digressing from the plot to offer a few authorial observations is quintessentially Victorian. Fowles, keenly aware of the differences between the Victorian and modern conceptions of the author, plays games with the reader, behaving one minute like Trollope, the next like Roland Barthes. Having ended Chapter Twelve by asking, "Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?", Fowles begins Chapter Thirteen by saying that he does not *know* who Sarah is; his story and characters are imaginary, and if he has pretended to know their minds, it is simply because "I am writing in . . . a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God." Rather than puncturing the fictional illusion, however, these interruptions foster in the reader that existential anxiety, that constant feeling of being off-balance, which one has to experience in order to see the world through Fowles's eyes. Indeed, Fowles goes so far as to offer alternate conclusions to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In one Charles never sleeps with Sarah and marries Ernestina; in the other his final confrontation with Sarah ends in an embrace. Perhaps the chief virtues of the novel, however, are altogether conventional ones: it is beautifully written, with an elegance and fluency that *The Magus* (vivid and energetic though it is) often lacks; it is extremely well paced; and it is a tour de force of imaginative reconstruction, not only of Victorian sensibilities but of the cities and landscape of nineteenth-century England. Some of Fowles's descriptions of the Dorset countryside and seascape are as evocative as impressionistic paintings.

In *Daniel Martin* (1977), Fowles returns to the contemporary scene. The novel (his longest) has many strengths, but is terribly rambling and prolix, and—when compared to its predecessor—seems the work of a weary and self-obsessed imagination. The eponymous narrator and protagonist—who sometimes refers to himself in the first person, sometimes in the third ("Dan")—is a successful middle-aged English playwright and screenwriter, the son of a Devonshire preacher, and (like Nicholas Urfe) an Oxford graduate, self-exile, and ladies' man. He is wrapping up a film in Los Angeles when Jane Mallory, the twin sister of his ex-wife, Nell, summons him to Oxford for a last meeting with her dying husband, Anthony, a philosophy don. At university, the four of them—Dan, Nell, Anthony, and Jane—were inseparable friends who shared a "false paradise," but Dan has not spoken to Anthony and Jane in years, and has seen Nell only to

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discuss their daughter, Caroline, who is now about twenty years old. Those happy Oxford days seem very distant now to Dan; directionless and unsatisfied, he finds the film industry every bit as corrupt and degrading as Charles Smithson finds Mr. Freeman's business in *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* He tells his mistress, a young English actress named Jenny McNeil, that he has been "creat[ing] other people" for so long that he feels as if he's "been taken over by someone else." He wants to write a novel, but claims to be too much of a perfectionist; Jenny shares with him a friend's observation that "being a perfectionist and being scared are often the same thing."

As for his personal life, he has always—shades of Ferdinand Clegg—looked upon women as "specimens"; they are mirrors in which he can "see himself reflected." His relationship with Jenny is less than passionate; though he is "in love with both her body and her independence," he feels that "only too frequently 'I love you' is a euphemism for 'I want to own you,'" and he would prefer not to be "intolerably possessive." He sincerely wants, he says, "to leave Jenny in the public gallery of her own freedom." But he also admits that he prefers not to feel responsible to her in any profound way. He is a member of a generation that was "brought up in some degree of the nineteenth century," and that in shedding "unnecessary guilt, irrational respect, and emotional dependence" has in effect sterilized itself, much as Sarah has sterilized herself by the end of *The French Lieutenant's Woman.*

When Jane asks him to come to Oxford, Dan is faced with what he recognizes to be a major decision, a "moment of will." In one of several flashbacks to his student days, he describes another fateful day when he and Jane, both already engaged to be married, declared their mutual love and, "surrender[ing] to existentialism," slept together. But they didn't follow through, and two unfortunate mismatches took place: Jane married the dry-as-dust Anthony, while Dan married the conventional Nell. If Dan's marriage eroded so quickly, it was because, happy though they had been at Oxford, Dan and Nell were incapable of living happily together in the "real" world. As for Jane and Anthony, they have stayed together in what Dan has always assumed to be a good marriage. It is not until Dan arrives at Oxford that he learns, from a cool, remote Jane, that it hasn't been good at all; Anthony agrees, admitting that over the years he's taken the life out of her, and asks that Dan help Jane to discover her old self. That night, Anthony kills himself, and when Dan invites Jane to join him on a Nile cruise, it is clear that something will develop between them.

In the meantime, however, Fowles offers some of his dullest, most discursive prose—and some of his most offensive polemics. The situation is unfortunate: Jane, as it happens, is both a Communist and a terrible snob; Dan seems at times to be only a bit less extreme in both directions; and Fowles, alas, has the opportunity—in the form of their slow, uneventful cruise—to write a number of long shipboard conversations between the two of them about their lives, ideas, and politics. Some of these passages are so rich with illogic—reminiscent of the worst of *The Aristos*—that one can hardly believe they are not intended as a grotesque parody of a certain type of blinkered upper-class English leftist. For instance, Jane declares her belief in the need for revolutionary social change, but says, "I think certain intellectual climates also have to be preserved. Disciplines. Knowledges. Even pleasures. For when the revolution's over." And for *her,* naturally. What a wonderfully convenient version of Marxism—Marxism with a loophole for intellectual writers and their inquisitive sisters-in-law!

The Nile cruise also gives Fowles a chance to expose Dan and Jane to American tourists—particularly a friendly young scientist named Mitch Hooper and his wife Marcia—and to present us with their opinions on the breed. Mitch makes the mistake of not sharing Dan and Jane's intellectual interests, and of employing too little subtlety and understatement in his conversation; Jane can barely get through their first conversation

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without cutting him dead, and afterward she says to Dan, "I used to hate my mother, she used to be so cutting to them [Americans, that is] sometimes. But I don't know if it isn't more honest than playing games." Dan's reply: "You mustn't expect subtlety from the backwoods of Illinois." (They're from Joliet.) And Dan and Jane proceed to note how the Hoopers disprove "the ridiculous notion that advanced technology produces richer human beings." Throughout all of this, it is clear that Fowles is using Dan and Jane as mouthpieces; we're supposed to share their contempt for the Hoopers, supposed to go along with their characterization of Americans as "the most culturally deprived people in the advanced West." What snobs these Marxists be!

The plain and unfortunate truth is that in *Daniel Martin,* more than in any of his previous books, Fowles lets his mania for ideas —especially bad ones—get away from him. The fact that he incorporates into the novel extensive quotations from both Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukács leads one to suspect that he was under the spell of one or both of these philosophers while writing the book. Who but John Fowles would quote sentences such as the following (from Gramsci) in a novel: "*The philosophy of praxis is consciousness full of contradictions, in which the philosopher himself, understood both individually and as an entire social group, not merely grasps the contradictions, but posits himself as an element of the contradiction and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action.*" So intent is Fowles on having his characters yammer endlessly at each other about such things that, when news comes of Anthony's suicide, Dan and Jane pause for only a moment, it seems, to express their shock and grief before resuming their witty dialectic. A remark that Anthony makes to Dan sums up the tone of the novel perfectly: "Perhaps the most profound breach in our marriage has been over the question of whether we have some control over our lives or not." Who but Fowles could write such a sentence with a straight face?

Since *Daniel Martin,* Fowles has published two additional novels, *Mantissa* (1982) and *A Maggot* (1985). Both of these books represent an appreciable falling off in quality from the level of his previous work. In both, Fowles experiments radically with form—and he does so, I think, at the expense of style and content. Significantly, whereas the titles of his earlier novels all refer to characters, the titles of these two novels describe the books themselves—and in neither case very flatteringly. A mantissa, as Fowles coyly explains in a footnote toward the end of the first book, quoting from the *Oxford English Dictionary,* is an "addition of comparatively small importance, especially to a literary effort or discourse." As for the word *maggot,* he tells us in the second book's prologue that it describes "the larval stage of a winged creature," has the obsolete meaning of "whim or quirk," and in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was used in the titles of "dance-tunes and airs," such as "Mr. Beveridge's Maggot." The titles of both of these later Fowles novels seem designed, then, to indicate that they are admittedly less substantial than their predecessors, that they are *jeux d'esprit* rather than full-fledged serious novels in the manner of *The Magus, The French Lieutenant's Woman,* and *Daniel Martin.*

By a considerable margin, *Mantissa* is the shortest of all Fowles's novels. The back cover of the paperback edition describes it as "teasingly enigmatic," and that it is—but indulgently, rather than interestingly, so. Feverish, inchoate, otherworldly, it is a cousin to such books as *Naked Lunch* and *Why Are We In Vietnam?* It begins with a page or so of obscure, convoluted prose in which a character comes to consciousness; he is then told that he is in a hospital room, is addressed as Mr. Green, and spends much of the rest of the novel being sexually abused by a female doctor and nurse, who tell him they are engaged in a serious course of medical treatment and that their function is to provide him with "a source of erotic arousal." But though they offer to do anything he wants—"we can offer most of [the

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positions] in the Kama Sutra, Aretino, the Hokuwata Monosaki, Kinsey, Sjostrom"—they show no feeling whatsoever, and take notes while speaking constantly in medical and psychoanalytic jargon. The book contains the usual references to many of Fowles's pet topics, but it feels shapeless and unfocused; it reads like a narcotics-induced revision of the most odious and sadistic portions of *The Magus*.

Like *The French Lieutenant's Woman, A Maggot,* set in eighteenth-century England, brings together the past and the present, the era of society and the age of the self. A young gentleman and his three companions disappear while on a journey; the book consists primarily of lengthy transcripts of the court inquiry into the matter. The key witness is a "wench" named Rebecca Lee, who tells a fantastic tale of being led by the young gentlemen to a cavern in a wood, where she was taken on board a spacecraft of sorts (she describes it as resembling a giant maggot) and shown films of an ideal futuristic world. She says that the young gentleman and his companions were divinities, and that they and their craft disappeared into the heavens. At the end of the book, Rebecca, having slept with one of the missing men, is delivered of a baby, who turns out to be Ann Lee. Since many readers may not know who Ann Lee is, Fowles, in an epilogue, explains that she was the founder of the Shakers, whom he admires because in the eighteenth century "[u]northodox religion was the only vehicle by which the vast majority, who were neither philosophers nor artists, could express this painful breaking of the seed of the self from the hard soil of an irrational and tradition-bound society." Ann Lee was, in other words, an existentialist.

To read *A Maggot* in conjunction with Fowles's earlier novels is a sad experience. The bluntly intrusive authorial remarks about free will and determinism, the Few and the Many, Godhead and authorship assure one that the book is the work of John Fowles, but most of the qualities that make his fiction memorable and his philosophy palatable are absent. Gone are the rich language, the evocative descriptions, the subtly etched characters of, say, *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* One has the feeling that Fowles—who has been quoted as saying that he would rather be a good philosopher or poet than a good novelist—has finally grown bored with the fictional way of truth and would rather just come out and say what he has to say. This book makes one realize that perhaps another Fowlesian antithesis should be added to the list at the beginning of this essay—namely, that of philosopher and novelist. For the struggle that each of Fowles's novels most assuredly dramatizes is the one between these two poles of his professional identity. There is nothing wrong, of course, with a novelist holding strong opinions; the trouble in Fowles's case is that he focuses so intently upon the beliefs his characters hold and the philosophical concepts they represent that he often seems in danger of reducing the characters to these beliefs and concepts. Fowles has come very close, in his career, to writing a first-rate novel, but one cannot be a truly first-rate novelist without a comprehensive gift for curiosity and empathy, an ability to examine individuals in isolation from their ideas—or at least an ability to recognize, for example, that one man's existentialism is not the same as another's.

For all his virtues and accomplishments, Fowles is the best possible illustration of why it was complimentary for Eliot to say of Henry James that he had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it. By closing his mind, as it were, to ideas, James opened it to insight, sympathy, understanding. Fowles, when he wants to be, is a wonderfully perceptive observer of human behavior; but all too often, he takes a promising character and—rather than allow him to develop, to take on dimension, to speak in a fresh and distinctive voice—Fowles leads him once more into the woods, puts him through the paces of yet another Fowlesian godgame, and forces him to utter axioms on mystery, passion, and the need to act. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* Fowles notes critically that the Victorians "were not the people for

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existentialist moments, but for chains of cause and effect; for positive all-explaining theories, carefully studied and studiously applied." Fowles is, in large part, correct to view himself as different from the Victorians he describes. Yet in their own way, his constantly recurring themes and archetypes are as stifling and tyrannical as the most stiff-necked sort of Victorian rationalism; in *Mantissa* and *A Maggot,* the enlightened tyranny of the earlier novels has grown capricious and repressive. Fowles's philosophy has, in short, held him and his fiction in its increasingly deleterious sway for a quarter of a century now; plainly the time has come for Fowles to be a real-life existential hero and to throw it over once and for all.

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Poems *by Daniel Mark Epstein, Andrew Hudgins, Patricia Clark & Harvey Shapiro*

The new music

Word-weary, I dream of some Valhalla where
I hear a god proclaim the swans will sing
once more. I look down from ramparts ranging
above thunderheads, and glimpse an opal sphere
that glows, and swells until it cracks skywide
with a silver-winged cyclone of swans who sing
and sing, until the audience of gods there
staggers like wild ships keeling in a tide.

In sympathy, the humblest of the host
whispers in my ear: "That world is lost.
The swans have come to return our gift of song.
Cloud-drifts will unveil a new world soon."
And gazing down again, I see the larks
from their heaven joyfully descending.

—*Daniel Mark Epstein*

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Almost in love

All night my neighbor's windchimes keep me up,
but I would be up anyway. I am
almost
        in love, enjoying the fears
and little jealousies that might
                mean nothing,
like sudden intimacies aboard a train,
where sentimental strangers fall asleep,
heads lolling on your shoulder. When they awake
they are in love with you
                or so unnerved
they blush
        and never look you in the eye.
The hot night makes me think of walking in
the cold down by the river
                where at night,
on long walks that I took to calm myself,
I'd kick coke bottles down the street.
                They'd skip
above the tarmac,
        skitter to a spin,
then stop,
        still whole.
                Sometimes I'd kick them blocks
before the clanking bottle broke, dissolved
to thick green shards that glittered with moonlight,
streetlight, houselight, or even by themselves,
of their own light.
                I loved the shattering
and gloried in the noise it made. But now
I dream of going back to shush that boy.
Be quiet, I'd say. *Your neighbors need their sleep.*
Be calm, I'd say to that fierce boy, who might
sneak in a neighbor's yard and break the chimes
that kept him up. *Just wait,* I'd say. *the chimes*
are searching for a tune.

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It's two A.M.
It could be any time. Rain starts, grows stronger.
Or is it bugs against the lighted glass?
They are persistent as drizzle, hitting
with the all-or-nothing authority of rain,
just that haphazard. I don't trust my own
advice. I lie awake
and envy how,
after they'd drawn in everything they knew,
ancient cartographers made up the rest
to make the map complete
and easier
to sell.
I think that's what I'll do—just draw
a river here, a mountain there, a town,
and then go out
to see how close to right
I've come.
The windchimes tangle with the rain.
The almost music that
they almost make
stalls on the verge,
half song,
half accident.

—Andrew Hudgins

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The marriage

In our first days together, how could I say
I saw the faces of those I loved fading away—
Their eyes, tears, and mouths blurred—
While I stood rooted in a foreign place?
I wasn't ready to speak a word.

Above reproach, you were the one I wanted
To reproach. In blossom, tulip trees planted
Along the street provided little shade,
For no escape from the sun was granted.
They seemed to mock what we'd made.

For months—and more—while the nights
Stayed humid under the city's million lights,
I watched a fan stir the air
Above our bed, cooling my skin to ice.
We were a stiff and quiet pair.

The morning light was banked like snow
Against the house, and we rose somehow.
Nothing had changed.
Except your face—worn, stubbled—looked now,
At last, no longer strange.

—Patricia Clark

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Estrangement

Waxwings flock to the backyard tree
And swallow the white berries,
Ignoring the tent caterpillars that feed
On leaves. Between them,
They pillage the tree.

I sit like a statue, watching,
And when the stars come out
There is nothing
But the look of things.
Even in sleep we struggle.

In morning light, as plain and bitter
As regret, we face each other
Without adornment.
Between us,
What will be left?

—*Patricia Clark*

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Last things

Is it a failure of my imagination
that I cannot believe in the end of the world.
Or that I believe in it, quietly, as I do in death
but in its own good time. Though, of course,
I understand the weapons are at hand, madmen are loose.
People I loved were concerned, are concerned.
I drift off into the orbit of my own troubles
finding them more familiar, I suppose, though
also more immediately painful. I think
I have made my choice. Others must make theirs.
Nothing can be done to coerce the unwilling
or to safeguard them or us if our dreams
project dragons reeling across a waste of sky.

—Harvey Shapiro

Curtains

Equipped with an imagination for disaster,
you never seem to anticipate the real disasters.
They leave you stunned, with no second line
of defense. Then, after days or weeks,
you begin to celebrate them, reciting inwardly
their advantages, how they free up
the imagination for a while. Not that what happened
was exactly falling-down funny. No,
it was like curtains in the colorful world of death.

—Harvey Shapiro

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Music

Sad thoughts on Walter Busterkeys, a.k.a. Liberace

by Samuel Lipman

Musical success, it has often been noted, is hardly a respecter of the high-minded. For composers and performers alike, the brass rings of fame and money are often not at the disposal of the noble in aspiration or even the uncommonly attractive, but rather of the attractively common.

And so it was, I am afraid, with the pianist Wladziu Valentino Liberace, who was born in West Allis, Wisconsin, in 1919, and who died in Palm Springs, California, this past February. As I write these words, the newspapers are full of stories that the pianist was indeed a victim of the dreaded disease AIDS, despite what his personal physician wrote on the death certificate.

This embarrassment to Liberace's memory seems only a pendant to a career that thrived on another, and quite different, kind of shame. For the embarrassment of Liberace's life was that of a success without respect, a success achieved through flouting the very idea of earning the respect of one's colleagues or of a sophisticated audience. What Liberace courted, and won, was the love of the world out of which he grew, and whose faithful son he remained to the end of his life.

But first some facts about Liberace, culled from a long *New York Times* obituary. His father was a musician in the Sousa concert band; his mother played the piano. He began piano lessons when he was four. As a teenager, he worked as a pianist in silent-movie theaters, and when he was fourteen he played, under the scarcely believable pseudonym of Walter Busterkeys, in a Wausau, Wisconsin, cocktail lounge. According to *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music,* he also played in an ice-cream parlor. Hard as it may be to imagine, he appeared with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as a soloist (according to the *Times*) under the *echtmusikalisch* Frederick Stock in 1936, playing the Liszt First Concerto; according to the *Grove Dictionary* article, the concert (conductor unnamed) took place in 1940, and the piece was the Liszt Second Concerto. In the *Grove Dictionary* account, he adopted the name Walter Busterkeys after moving to New York in 1940 to perform in nightclubs.

Most performing musicians, like the specialists they are trained to be, continue assiduously to cultivate their failures even when the evidence for those failures is overwhelming. Not so Liberace. According to the *Times,* three years after his Chicago Symphony debut, he "stumbled onto the musical formula that made him famous":

> It happened at a recital in La Crosse, Wis. The audience yelled for Liberace to play the popular novelty song "Three Little Fishies" as an encore, and he did. This break with concert tradition "really shook 'em up," Liberace said later, and he realized he was on the road to riches, rhinestones, and Rolls-Royces.

Whatever his initial progress on the road to fame, Liberace hit the jackpot in the mid-

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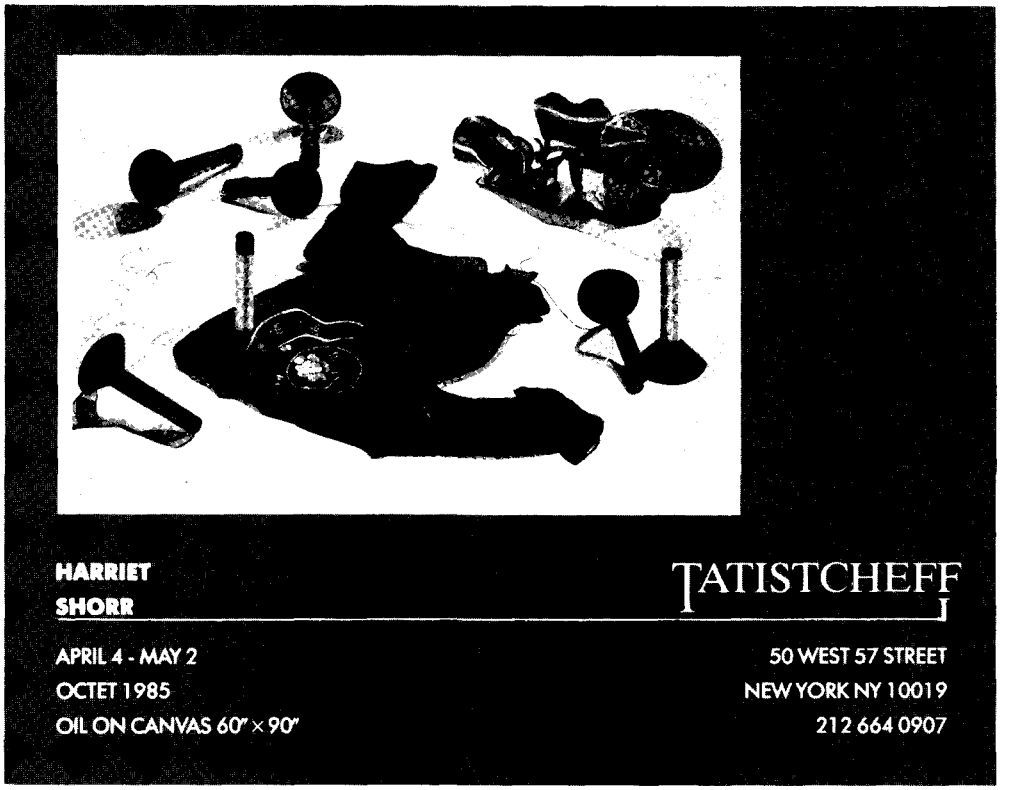

1950s with weekly programs on national television, combining his playing of arrangements of classical pieces with a line of patter so sugary-sweet as to seem hostile to those outside the social context of his charm. He often spoke in hyperbolic terms of his mother and of his close relationship to her. And what one can only call Liberace's *mise-en-scène* always included gaudy costumes, which in the end became gowns, and a quasi-votive candelabrum on the piano.

As a young pianist in the 1950s, I could hardly avoid being aware of Liberace. What thrust him to my attention was not simply his success, for television (like pop music and the movies before) was always unearthing assorted phenomena for the worship of the masses and the spiteful delectation of the elite. Liberace, alas, quickly became a personal matter for me everywhere I went outside the limited musical circles in which I moved, for his very success—often he played compositions I had played myself, among them demanding works of Chopin—was a shining model of what a pianist might aspire to, and a mocking example of what no classical pianist might attain.

Had Liberace played badly, my discomfiture might have been easily handled: serious artists can always reassure themselves by pointing to the triumph of the incompetent. Unfortunately for my feelings, Liberace played rather well. He displayed at all times a large, accurate, and brilliant technique, even indulging himself from time to time in impressive displays of octaves, scales, and complicated passagework. His tone, it is true, was prevailingly hard-edged, but that could easily be explained by the hard-edged tone of the piano he had chosen to play. All in all, his playing purled and glittered just the way an accomplished pianist's should. As for his meretricious choice of repertory and the lack of any spiritual quality in his playing, his rapturous audience reception had a curious way of putting such metaphysical deficiencies into limbo.

What now in retrospect seems clear to me is that Liberace's great commercial success

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from 1956 on—using as it did television and hyped personal appearances to sell a debased version of classical music—made possible the great commercial success two years later of a vastly more traditional crowd-pleasing pianist. It will be remembered that Van Cliburn—born in Louisiana and raised in Texas—won the International Tchaikowsky Competition in Moscow in April of 1958, and was suddenly catapulted into national prominence not only as a great pianist but as a *popular* pianist. Cliburn's initial repertory was the famous Tchaikowsky B-flat minor Concerto and the Rachmaninoff Third Concerto, both high-Romantic works hugely appealing to an enormous public. Cliburn's manner on and off the platform, at once soft-spoken and easy, seemed not just authentically American but, like Liberace's, authentically non-New York American. Cliburn's mother, like Liberace's, had been a pianist, and indeed was his only teacher until he was seventeen. She remained a constant presence in his life as he toured the country. Though Cliburn did (somewhat stiffly) essay Beethoven and Brahms, it was as a performer of Tchaikowsky, Rachmaninoff, and, of course, Chopin, that his career was made. While many serious musicians respected his unpretentious musicality and his unforced piano tone, his greatest personal success was made with those who had hitherto been strangers to concert halls. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Cliburn's fans, like Liberace's, have remained strangers to concert halls ever since, at least when those concert halls are occupied by serious musical programs.

If the legacy of Liberace has been the power of television to make great careers on the fringes of classical music (a power which has recently been displayed in the case of Luciano Pavarotti), the most important legacy of Cliburn, undoubtedly stemming from the size of his post-Moscow career, has been the contest mania among young performers all over the world. This mania, which places more emphasis on contest competition than on mature artistry, has resulted in an explosion of contests and winners, and a dearth of interesting performers growing up at their own pace.

And so it is easy now to see the different but also curiously similar careers of Liberace and Cliburn—the one ended by death and the other by what one can only assume is a combination of physical and emotional problems (Cliburn has not played in public since 1978)—as having provided spectacularly inapplicable models for the careers of serious musicians. Such is the tragedy of it all. There is also a strange irony in these two great but ultimately ephemeral reputations.

The irony is simply that both Liberace and Cliburn were able to capitalize—and were perhaps the last pianists to do so—on the splendid epoch of the piano as *the* musical instrument par excellence. That epoch lasted from the beginning of the nineteenth century to World War II. During those one hundred and forty years the piano was indispensable to creators and performers for the making of both music and careers; it was indispensable, too, across middle-class society as the carrier of a music serious in origin and popular in reception. The piano in the living room, like the candelabrum (so beloved by Liberace and his fans) in the dining room, became an emblem of cultural advancement and participation. It was this touching aspiration which made possible two huge successes, one now ended and the other, we can only hope, in abeyance. Whatever the future holds in store for music in general, the piano will probably never again enjoy such popularity and prestige.

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Architecture

Isozaki's MOCA

by Christopher Flacke

Los Angeles, the heart of the southwestern megalopolis, increasingly likes to refer to itself as the financial headquarters of the emerging "Pacific Rim" economy. Consequently, in the last ten years a fleet of oversized skyscrapers has drastically reshaped the central city in imitation of downtown New York, the ultimate model for all financial centers. What the rest of the country still thinks of as the archetypal sprawling city is now punctuated by a surprisingly dense core of mostly undistinguished behemoths; and future building seems set to follow the same vertical lines.

Against these huge mirrored surroundings, the scale and finish of Arata Isozaki's recently completed building for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, itself a new institution, are very carefully conceived. Its diminutive profile is more overwhelmed than overwhelming. The visitor can stand on the sidewalk before the façade of the museum's central mass, which drops straight to the property line, and still easily see the top of the wall, with sky beyond. The architect compares his finely scaled assemblage of shapes to a village huddling in a valley of skyscrapers; it is not hard to foresee the day when the museum will become a small oasis amid Manhattanesque canyons.

Nearly as distinctive as the modest proportions is the rough, persimmon-colored Indian sandstone that covers most of the building's exterior. The sandstone is clearly a hit. Part of its fascination is the precision with which the stone has been applied, particularly in contrast with the roughness of its surface. Even more compelling is the glorious red, now an instant flag of recognition for the museum. It is hard to picture another art institution in the United States that would feel right in this cheerful, unabashed color, but the red immediately endows MOCA with a personality and makes the jumpy bits and pieces of its building cohere. Color, often slighted by architects, provokes here a more immediate and personal response than any other architectural feature; MOCA's red may be a populist touch or personal whimsy, but it is refreshing on either level.

Less convincing are the dark green panels and pink piping which clad secondary portions of the exterior (end walls, a ticket booth, etc.). But the architect has chosen so well everywhere else that one feels inclined to allow him even these. Resting for a moment on a low wall outside the museum, one is amazed at the eerily silky sheen on the sandstone; it comes as no surprise to learn that it has been laser-polished.

MOCA stands on Grand Avenue (thus named long before it started to become so), halfway between Los Angeles's financial district and the mall connecting City Hall and the city's Music Center complex. Or rather, it stands on and below Grand Avenue, a bilevel thoroughfare. If one walks to Hope Steet, a little to the west, there is a wonderful view of MOCA, which won't be

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shown in photographs: the building appears to have been constructed on a freeway ramp, floating up in the sky. Its above-ground public portions thrust up into the sunlight; the rest hulks in the gloom beneath the road. The entrance, on the Grand Avenue viaduct, is therefore actually on the building's second main floor, with the galleries lying half a level below.

Isozaki has responded with ingenuity to the difficult task of burying spaces for viewing art underground. To be sure, the entrance, opening from a sunken courtyard in the middle of the complex, requires an ad hoc sign for clarity ("MOCA entrance this way"). But the unconventional necessity of descending to enter an important public building does not ruin the moment of ritual. In fact, to *ascend* into this intentionally non-monumental collage of forms might seem strange. The sunken court—a void—at the heart of the building may owe something to the Japanese concept of the empty center, which found its greatest Western apologist in Roland Barthes, whose famous essay, "The Empire of Signs," was a highly personal attempt to present Japanese cultural values to a Western public. Visitors may judge for themselves whether such theoretical explanations enhance their ability to apprehend and enjoy the museum. Certainly the sunken entry and buried galleries are prime instances of the knack the architect has displayed throughout this project for turning the exigencies of site and program to the building's advantage.

The galleries—which will be occupied through January 10, 1988 by a huge survey show called "Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art 1945-1986"—contrast powerfully with the textured exterior, deliberately eschewing luxurious or unusual materials. The interiors are carefully crafted, but anonymous: matte white walls and blond maple flooring, with no portals, cornices, or baseboard moldings—not even stylized ones. For the galleries, Isozaki has said that he was concerned with proportions and light, no more; the results bear him out. The rooms lead effortlessly into one another, making purely stylistic devices meant to impart a sense of rhythm and progress seem irrelevant.

This apparently straightforward arrangement of galleries disguises one of the building's most welcome innovations. Isozaki's plan breaks the stranglehold convention of enforced sequential progress through predetermined galleries that increasingly afflicts American museums (and exhibition design, often the testing ground for more permanent installations). Down a step or two from the great desk which faces the entrance, for example, is an inconspicuous passage through which a visitor might choose to skip the first three immense galleries and merge directly into the flow of viewers. The more numerous galleries at the other end of the building also offer alternate routes and cul-de-sac rooms, encouraging thoughtful circulation rather than merely clearing a circuit along which hordes can troop past art.

The best galleries are literally high points of the building. Many visitors are overwhelmed by Gallery A, a perfect cube surmounted by a pyramidal volume with a large skylight at its tip. Despite the room's virtuoso presence—it is the J. Paul Getty Trust Gallery, by the way—it seems sterile and off-putting, not a comfortable room for looking at art. This impression is reinforced by the large opening into Gallery A from MOCA's busy lobby: pedestrian traffic intrudes, and noise and squeals bounce off the vault. The room's expansiveness seems unexploited by the crowded population of modestly scaled sculpture on exhibit here. Large objects, like the Claes Oldenburg Swiss Army pocketknife that is currently under the Guggenheim's rotunda, might fare better.

Next to Gallery A is a hushed, spiritual corner tented over with two pyramid-shaped vaults, echoes of the adjoining larger space. But Gallery B assumes an entirely different personality. Light filters in, rather than flooding down; the slight lip or ledge formed by the ceiling as it meets the glass roofs helps to diffuse the light from these smaller openings. At the moment occupied

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by half a dozen Rothko paintings, the chapel-like ambience of this gallery, more than its neighbor, stills the visitor and signals the shift in metabolism that accompanies museum-going.

The most splendid gallery in the museum is a huge space occupying the entire southern end of the building, a large rectangle roofed with long ranks of triangular clerestory skylights. It has the clean-lined expansiveness of a train shed minus the usual traces of industrial/technical fetishism. The ceiling between the lights has been pared into arrowhead-shaped baffles, which sweep down to knifelike edges. Piercing the bays of the ceiling is a grid of rails supporting the track lighting. The overlay of functional elements combines to shape a benignly rhythmic ceiling, lending this large, multipurpose room an air of purposeful serenity. The gallery handles with equal aplomb a variety of medium-sized paintings hung along the perimeter and several small-scale works for which a free-standing central chamber has been built.

The remainder of the interior spaces are functional rectangular rooms with more controlled lighting levels; noise prevention seems more than satisfactory throughout. Even when large crowds fill the passages and galleries, the building retains its poise: this calm owes much to a civilized noise level, and it has been achieved without the indignity of wall-to-wall carpeting.

The restraint of the galleries contrasts sharply with the random disposition of colors, volumes, and surfaces on the building's exterior. At least for this viewer, this was cause for a certain tension or unease. MOCA looks like a building constructed from a kit of blocks or toy bricks: it is visually appealing, likeable—but with a disquieting note of the arbitrary. Can the impulse to take the blocks down and try again lie very far away? If there are rigorous geometries or other intellectual schemes underlying Isozaki's arrangement of shapes and masses, they are not apparent, though this nonhierarchical scheme might be interpreted as an

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appropriately contextual response to the museum's urban setting.[1]

The rejection of traditional or formal organization necessarily emphasizes the importance of vantage point, since the shapes and forms compose so differently from different perspectives. In this sense, the vantage point chosen by the architect—as original conceiver of the building—*is* the building. Indeed, some early conceptual sketches by Isozaki of the barrel vault, office-block, and pyramidal skylights, often superimposed, offer delightful juxtapositions of the various elements. Yet they suggest that he too thinks of the building as a set of blocks, to be combined differently in each person's perception.

If this is so, then despite the sandstone, the architect can neither bear nor claim any real responsibility for the way his creation is perceived. The work, imprinting itself differently on different minds, is essentially amorphous. Perhaps such a building is intended as a gesture of deference to a pluralistic society, but it offers a disturbing model for anyone who enjoys distinctive architecture—who looks to a building for firmness, not just delight. The architect can practice the virtues of sensitivity and self-effacement, only to clear a path for arbitrariness. Like the political anarchist ready to discard society's benefits as the price of eliminating its evils, Isozaki may be felt to have diminished his building by lowering his aspirations—perhaps unthinkingly—as he strove for a kind of multivalent acceptability. The building embodies the dilemma of a transcultural architect, who finds himself compelled to forego some explicit statements of value as he works to create something of relevance to both cultures.

Isozaki's well-known sense of humor and whimsy can be seen as a mechanism for sidestepping this conflict. It may also be an appropriate architectural response to the image of the "new" art museum, a proliferating institution with enhanced prestige, a larger audience, and more funding than its predecessor of a decade or two ago.[2] The late Arthur Drexler, for many years the curator of the department of architecture and design at New York's Museum of Modern Art, summed up the forces creating the new museum at a symposium sponsored by the Architectural League of New York in December, 1985:

> The existence of museums in a mercantile society has increasingly come to depend on the institutions' ability to lure members, patrons, sponsors, donors, and corporate CEOs to those gala events that make people feel they have arrived in the world . . . . The cynicism you detect in my comments is genuine, but it also recognizes that the first duty of cultural institutions, as of individuals, is to survive . . . . The principal responsibility that museums are now facing is to engineer their own transition in an economic, social, and cultural matrix that is changing very rapidly. Institutions sense that they may be able to guarantee their survival by entertaining the community. That intention now influences the shapes museums are taking.[3]

Such a new museum may demand, or at least be able to support, a different architectural language—or slang, as the case may be. One may welcome this language, abhor it, or take Mr. Drexler's fatalistic view and consider it inevitable. But there is no doubt that it has already influenced the shapes museums are taking in the United States. The high seriousness of intent and style in Richard Meier's museum for Atlanta, whatever its functional deficiencies, may prove one of the last examples of a classic *tone* in art-museum design; conversely, the whimsy of Michael Graves's proposed addition to

1 This seems to be the model for the Temporary Contemporary, the warehouse renovated in 1983 by Frank Gehry to serve MOCA as a preliminary, now adjunct, facility. The TC is a large, undifferentiated space, one curators "appropriate" in different ways to install their shows.

2 See Suzanne Stephens's introduction to *Building the New Museum* (The Architectural League of New York/Princeton Architectural Press, 1986).

3 *Building the New Museum*, p. 57.

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the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, whatever its merits, may prove a model of things to come.

To be fair, Isozaki has avoided the grandiose gestures which seem to characterize contemporary museum design, particularly the mindless shopping-mall-style greenhouse atria which blight so many American art museums (the Museum of Modern Art's rear façade being a prime example). Indeed, Isozaki's building compares favorably with the caricature of a serious educational institution that the Modern has become. MOCA may be lighthearted, but it is not meretricious. The offensive atmosphere that plagues the entrance to the Museum of Modern Art (a combination of department store, theater lobby, and airport security check) has been scrupulously avoided in Los Angeles.[4] The primary functional improvement is achieved by placing the necessary consumer facilities on exterior patios, outside of and removed from the museum galleries and auditorium.

The upper-level patio/sculpture court is yet another instance of Isozaki's golden touch; its scale and usage make it a big outdoor living room, a feature Southern Californians appreciate and use unselfconsciously. It accommodates the gift shop (where cash registers somehow seem to ring less loudly), while a café, "inspired by the popular Italian paninoteca" according to a museum brochure, is foreseen for the lower-level entry court, though it might better be housed upstairs too. Unfortunately, the promenade terrace along the patio's lower edge, where shaped hedges and calm, symmetrical reflecting pools would seem to promise a grand vista, incongruously gives onto the balconied façades of an apartment high-rise—a defect, admittedly, for which not the architect but the developers who contributed this site must be blamed.

The most admirable aspect of Isozaki's work for MOCA is the challenge he has met in designing a building of character for a still nascent institution. The physical structure may disappoint in some regards, but the architect's successful completion of his task in the fullest sense is evident. MOCA had just begun to assemble the bare bones of an incipient museum when Isozaki was hired in 1981. Throughout the ensuing architect-client disagreements over design, which evidently could be traced to trustees not yet entirely sure of what they wanted, Isozaki seems to have done an enviable job of shepherding the building's development. In truth, Isozaki's building, together with Frank Gehry's subtle yet characteristic re-design of the Temporary Contemporary (TC), has done much to define an institution that was born almost literally overnight. (Its founding was first contemplated in 1979 by Eli Broad, a Los Angeles developer and collector.) MOCA and the sidekick TC are buildings clearly loved by their owners and visitors not just as real estate, but as home. It may be the ardor of first-time homeowners, but the pride and delight are not misplaced.

4 However, it remains to be seen how much restraint Isozaki and his collaborator James Stewart Polshek will eventually exercise in their recently awarded commission to expand McKim, Mead and White's Brooklyn Museum. Escalators and greenhouse roofs are enthusiastically foreseen for that project, according to a presentation made by Mr. Polshek at the Brooklyn Museum on January 8, 1987.

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Theater

"Crime and Punishment" in Washington

by Fernanda Eberstadt

"Crime is a fine thing, both in history and in poetry, both on canvas and in marble," wrote the cheerfully perverse Diderot. (The crime he was referring to was Christianity.) And likewise on the stage, one might think, in anticipation of the Soviet emigré director Yuri Lyubimov's production of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which played at Washington's Arena Stage theater this winter.[1]

Until his exile in 1984, Lyubimov's artistic career in the USSR was an emblematic one, marked by those veerings between compliance with the regime and minute acts of rebellion which characterize the working life of the contemporary Soviet artist. Born in 1917, he served during World War II in an ensemble organized by Lavrenti Beria, Stalin's Minister of Internal Affairs, to entertain the troops and to jolly up Party officials on the home front. In 1964, after a full career as an actor, he became the director of Moscow's Taganka Theatre, a position he held for two decades, during which time he produced his own dramatizations of the work of Pushkin, Mayakovsky, and the songwriter and singer Vladimir Vysotsky, as well as staging theatrical versions of such politically ambiguous novels as Yuri Trifonov's *The House on the Embankment* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (which Lyubimov will be reviving this May at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge). Rejecting the Stanislavskian naturalism which had dominated the Soviet theater for seventy years and proved a fitting vehicle for socialist-realist drama, Lyubimov resurrected a tradition of fantastic anti-realism and extreme stylization that had been initiated by the director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) —who was murdered by Stalin for his experimentalism—and practiced to a lesser degree by Yevgeni Vakhtangov (1883-1922), in whose school and theater Lyubimov studied and acted.

Lyubimov has been at once a dangerous and a highly prestigious figure in official Soviet eyes. Under Yuri Andropov (who in his stint as KGB chief had been something of a patron to the Taganka director), Lyubimov's productions were ever more stringently censored and even banned. At the same time, government agencies purloined for themselves a larger and larger share of house seats, crowding out the less privileged culture lovers who would wait all night outside the Taganka Theatre for a ticket. Finally, in 1983, while Lyubimov was in London directing the production of *Crime and Punishment* which later came to the Arena Stage, the Soviet leadership dismissed him in absentia from his post at the Taganka, voted him out of the Communist Party, and finally stripped him of his Russian

1 "Crime and Punishment" was at the Arena Stage theater in Washington, D.C. from January 2 through February 22. The play was adapted by Yuri Lyubimov and Yuri Karyakin and translated by Michael Henry Heim.

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citizenship. Most recently however, *The New York Times* reports that Lyubimov has been tentatively invited back to resume his directorship of the Taganka: a genial display of Gorbachevian *glasnost* (a policy that would seem to consist of inviting home one celebrated Russian while imprisoning ten less famous ones). This offer Lyubimov has declared himself willing to accept, on the condition that he retain the freedom to enter and leave the country as he chooses, "a right that is not enjoyed by Soviet citizens," the *Times* article laconically concludes.

All this by way of background is meant to suggest that despite the religious and anti-Stalinist motifs that flavor Lyubimov's production of *Crime and Punishment*, its director should not be regarded as a "dissident" or still less as an anti-Communist (he was only thrown out of the Party three years ago) but rather as an artist torn between a hunger for personal freedom and loyalty to a country that until recently has done quite well by him.

Lyubimov's *Crime and Punishment* is a curious mixture of the avant-garde and the traditional. He plays the novel at high speed, slicing up and reshuffling its chronology. Thus, the audience is ushered into the theater by a punky drudge pointing a flashlight at the already butchered corpses of the pawnbroker and her sister, crumpled in the corner under a candlelit icon. Lyubimov animates props into a menacing life of their own: a bloodstained door turns into a coffin and a crucifix, attaching itself at various points to the hero's back and, poltergeist-like, hurtling him across the stage. The police inspector skips rope with a hangman's noose; a screaming wraith tears around the stage flailing an ax; blindfolded crowds grope their way across the floorboards, while other characters dance with or shake their fists at their own shadows. Fog and strobe lights are used to unnerving effect, combing the audience and stage as if in search of a soul lost at sea. The play's sound track, composed by the renowned Soviet musician Adison Denisov, bestows on every character a musical leitmotif, and combines muffled and warped-sounding church chants with melancholy, lubricious tango tunes, ostensibly to juxtapose Dostoevsky's own perceptions of contemporary licentiousness with his dreams of a future Christian redemption. Such special effects have become the theatrical trademarks of Yuri Lyubimov, whose plays are not plays, in the words of Arena Stage director Zelda Fichandler, but rather "a score of visual and aural images made by actors, light, sound, and design."

If Lyubimov's "score" for *Crime and Punishment* occasionally suggests *The Omen, Part III* in the borderline campiness of its special effects, his philosophical interpretation of the novel is wonderfully faithful.

Crime and Punishment, as everyone knows, is the story of Raskolnikov, an impoverished former student, who murders an old pawnbroker and her sister in order to prove to himself that he is a "Napoleon" who is "permitted" to transgress human laws and commit all crimes in the name of future glory. Human life is merely fertilizer, Raskolnikov maintains, flesh-and-blood mortar with which to build a just society. Anyway, he argues, the old woman and her sister were subhuman, mere leeches: if stealing their money enables a poor man to embark on a career of spectacular philanthropies, then "logic" tells us that this murder is necessary and even laudable. As Lyubimov's characters echo in a theatrical leitmotif: "One crime, a hundred good deeds: it's simple arithmetic."

Set in a suffocating St. Petersburg slum during the dog days of summer, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is not only a political allegory but also a suspense tale, in which Raskolnikov is pursued by the cat-and-mouse games of the police inspector Porfiry Petrovich, a brilliant and melancholy man who knows Raskolnikov did it and knows also that he will give himself up. Raskolnikov, cornered and realizing himself to be no Napoleon, darts from braggart impenitence to hellish hallucinations, craftiness, bad temper, and sheer terror. In one

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haunting moment, he tells us feelingly of the man condemned to death who realizes so precious is life that to remain perched for eternity in the crevice of a cliff in a space one-foot-by-one-foot would be better than to die. In the end, brought by the child-prostitute Sonya to a willingness to atone for his crime, Raskolnikov turns himself in and is deported to a Siberian labor camp (to which Sonya follows), where we are told he undergoes a spiritual rebirth. The novel concludes on a quietly ecstatic note, with the promise of a new life and a very different kind of "great deed" in Raskolnikov's future.

Dostoevsky, as Lyubimov realizes, is pre-eminently the novelist of the idea made flesh. That his walking-and-talking ideas are so searingly and transcendently human, universal even, is a tribute to his profound novelistic powers. Although a writer like Tolstoy is thought to be a greater realist, one rarely meets a man of whom one thinks, "Here's the spitting image of Konstantin Levin," or even of Andrei Bolkonsky, while Raskolnikovs crop up all too frequently, mostly muttering to themselves on the subway.

Dostoevsky's novel—and Lyubimov's play—depict, quite simply, the sin of pride and its political consequences: the ascendence of leaders who regard other lives as less than human and who massacre innocents in the name of an idea. Lyubimov's play, in addition to this, militates against the official Soviet verdict that Raskolnikov's crime is a just protest against capitalist oppression. Lyubimov's production, the director claims, was inspired by his horror at hearing of a contemporary Russian schoolboy who, in conformity with the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of *Crime and Punishment*, wrote in an essay: "Raskolnikov was right to murder the old woman. Too bad he got caught." These lines, scrawled in an open copybook, are placed on a schoolroom desk in the lobby of the theater and are recited again by Raskolnikov at the conclusion of Lyubimov's play.

Radicalism in its various guises is scourged in *Crime and Punishment*, not only in the person of Raskolnikov, but also more humorously in such lesser figures as Lebezyatnikov, the ranting feminist-Communist who hopes that his future mate will be sufficiently liberated to cuckold him (and who in Lyubimov's play stampedes across the stage in maroon corduroys and granny glasses screaming, "Change! Radical change!"); in Luzhin, who uses the doctine of "rational self-interest" to vindicate his bilking of widows and orphans; and in Raskolnikov's fellow students, who spout the fashionable belief that crime is not an expression of human character but of "environment" and an unjust economic order, and hence will disappear in the Communist paradise.

Pitted against Dostoevsky's half-menacing caricatures of the radical youth of the 1860s and their middle-aged acolytes are the police inspector Porfiry Petrovich, with his exasperated declaration, "Pity the criminal all you like, but don't call evil good"; Razumikhin, Raskolnikov's hotheaded and quixotic buffoon of a friend, who reminds us of the irreducibility of human freedom; and the prostitute Sonya, a seventeen-year-old holy idiot, meek and stubborn, who sees Raskolnikov's crime as an act of "taking suffering upon oneself" and who shows him that love of God is all that keeps hell's abyss from devouring us.

Lyubimov strips Dostoevsky's novel down to these bare bones: pride, sin, a depraved society whose falsely "scientific" theories tend toward slavery, and against these forces, Christian love, repentance, and redemption.

And yet although Lyubimov so faithfully duplicates Dostoevsky's message, his play is as halfhearted and diffuse as the novel is infernal and suffocating in its single-minded intensity and almost hysterically uplifting in its conclusion. One rises from reading *Crime and Punishment* weak and grateful as after the breaking of a mortal fever; one leaves the Arena Stage feeling vaguely let down.

The problem with Lyubimov's play is twofold. First of all, the acting is—by now, famously—awful. Raskolnikov is played by Randle Mell, who fortunately is the best of the bunch: a sturdy, pugilistic-looking fel-

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low with a twisted mouth and eyes jammed deep into his skull as if by the devil's thumbs. Mell's performance is creditable, but stolid, lacking the mercurial and almost feminine mobility—the swift swoops from catatonia to black rage to an overweening intellectual vanity to a gallantly loving pity for the fallen—that marks this twenty-three-year-old philosopher-student, the idolized only son of a now penniless minor aristocratic provincial family. At the other end of the Arena spectrum is Sonya, here played by Kate Fuglei as an uptight anorectic who peevishly sobs out all her words. Raskolnikov's sister Dunya, a noble young woman of Roman virtue, Heather Ehlers serves up as a busy chit. Richard Bauer, a veteran Arena actor, converts Porfiry Petrovich into a bundle of campy twitches and tics: clearly a considered reading of the police inspector, but one which rather diminishes the stature of a man who in Dostoevsky's novel is seen as a fitting counterpart to Raskolnikov, a Grand Inquisitor to his Christ, and who is accompanied, moreover, by an almost tragic sense of genius wasted. (That Porfiry Petrovich is also an eccentric is undeniable: I've sometimes wondered if Sir Arthur Conan Doyle thought of him in creating Sherlock Holmes, another complex and deeply divided sleuth of human pathology.) Of the Arena Stage's mostly lackluster performances, I should single out for exception Helen Carey's fine rendition of the crazed and consumptive Katerina Ivanovna, John Gegenhuber's rather beguiling Lebezyatnikov, and Vivienne Shub's lively cameo as Katerina Ivanovna's troll-like German landlady.

It would be a mistake to blame the lightweight acting that marks Lyubimov's *Crime and Punishment*, as critics have done, on short rehearsal schedules, on the difficulty of working through an interpreter with a director who doesn't speak English, or on the invincibly corn-fed Americanness of actors too wholesome to worm their ways into the twisted Russian soul. On the contrary, by all accounts Lyubimov is a director after the old school, who arranges every raised eyebrow and dimple and who allows little leeway for the kind of creative improvisation with which many contemporary actors are accustomed to feeling their way into a role. Furthermore, all this insipid acting leans in one particular direction: toward a lamely jaunty trivialization of Dostoevsky's book.

Dostoevsky, like Dickens, is an intensely dramatic novelist who plotted his books in terms of scenes, visual motifs, vivid characters, and even lighting. Dostoevsky, however, although extremely funny in a sardonic way, is a quite different kind of writer from Dickens. Lyubimov and his cast enact *Crime and Punishment* as if it were the slightly gloomy older brother to *Oliver Twist*, with a lot of droll mannerisms, haunted-house effects, and stamping of the feet at social injustice. Even its fogs seem to belong more to Dickens's London than to St. Petersburg's Haymarket in a July heat wave. Yet despite these antic maneuvers, Lyubimov's production strikes a flat note, false to Dickens and Dostoevsky alike.

Finally, no matter how "dramatic" Dostoevsky's novel may be, any theatrical adaptation of it must answer the question: Why bother to stage a great work of literature? What does Lyubimov tell us about Dostoevsky, about evil in the human heart, about Russia, about tyrannical philosophies, that we can't get from reading *Crime and Punishment* for ourselves? The answer, sadly, is nothing. Blinding white klieg lights and bloodstained doors flying off their hinges cannot substitute for those satanic passions of pride and despair which lie at the heart of Dostoevsky's first great novel. Moreover, these special effects, which on the Soviet stage may be so avant-garde as to constitute a minor act of political subversion, to American theatergoers seem old hat. And this tells us something significant about Lyubimov's production, which in the end seems to be aimed more across the Bering Straits than at its Washington, D.C. audience.

Lyubimov's *Crime and Punishment*, deploring the murderous rages of Stalinism and appealing to his countrymen's half-buried religious hopes, can probably best be regarded as the director's postcard home.

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Dance

Innocents from abroad

by Eva Resnikova

The Fairy Godmother is an android who packs a neon wand, but in most respects Maguy Marin's *Cendrillon* for the Lyon Opera Ballet, presented at City Center in January, looks back to the avant-garde past. The multilevel Constructivist set and masked and padded Bauhaus-style dancers recall the heady days of experimentation in the arts of post-revolutionary Russia and pre-Nazi Germany. Even the roadster in which Cinderella rides to the ball conjures up a time when it was possible to believe in the machine as a force for unmitigated good. It was a period of passionate idealism, made all the more poignant for us in retrospect by the knowledge of the terrible oppression that was to quash it and so many of its true believers.

This sense of a lost world of innocence permeates Marin's *Cinderella* through her use of childhood as a metaphor: the set is a doll's house filled with toys; the guests at the ball play hopscotch and jump rope; the Prince makes his journey on a rocking horse. Since the playthings are in the style of the belle époque, a further note of nostalgia is introduced that has a special significance for the French, to whom this was, literally, the "beautiful time."

The most striking feature of Marin's production is her use of masks to provide an immutable physical manifestation of each character's persona: Cinderella cannot hide her innate goodness any more than her stepsisters can hide their innate vulgarity. The masks reinforce the theme of the futility of deception symbolized in the fairy tale by the glass slipper: though the stepsisters and countless other female hopefuls throughout the kingdom pretend it might be theirs, we know that only Cinderella's foot will fit it.

The stepsisters' attempts to appear other than they are make them ridiculous, and it is this side of their character that Marin chooses to emphasize rather than an abstract evil. She has taken her cue from Prokofiev's music, which is filled with notes of satire and caricature. The guests at the ball are grotesque arrivistes vainly attempting to impress the Prince with their lumbering parodies of elegant manners, the unseemliness of their behavior heightened by their monstrously misshapen bodies. Cinderella and the Prince, on the other hand, have the sweet, open faces of porcelain dolls; he is dressed as a baby-blue toy soldier, and she wears either apron or tutu over a white body suit distorted only by a slight padding of the torso to disguise the womanly shape of the dancer who portrays her. Their arms hang stiffly from hunched shoulders, fingers held together in mitten shapes, in the image of their ancestor, Fokine's Petrouchka. Their movements are methodical, like an automaton's, yet seem suffused with an inner grace, bringing to mind Heinrich von Kleist's famous parable of the marionette theater, in which he makes a case for the superiority of puppets over living dancers: puppets, his spokesman proclaims, "would

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always be without affectation," unlike real dancers, who have "eaten of the tree of knowledge" and are therefore tainted with self-consciousness, the destroyer of humans' "natural grace."

For Marin, then, the crucial conflict in *Cinderella* is not the traditional good versus evil of the fairy tale but rather unselfconscious innocence versus studied affectation. It is an interpretation that has a solid basis in Prokofiev's socialist-realist-tinged conception of the ballet: he wanted his Cinderella to be not just a fairy-tale character but a "real person." The goodness of Cinderella and the Prince lies in their ingenuousness and directness, in contrast to the pretentiousness and deviousness of those who surround them. In the West, the tradition has been to play the stepsisters as "uglies" by men *en travestie*, but in Russia these are leading female soloist roles, unattractive only in character: one sister is called Krivlyaka, or Affected (Natalia Makarova danced her at the Kirov); the other, Zlyuka, or Furious. The implied analogy to the good, simple people versus the decadent deposed aristocracy—not to mention the entire decadent West—was surely not lost on Soviet audiences of 1945.

Marin makes no attempt to follow the structure of Prokofiev's score, which is that of a conventional nineteenth-century story ballet. Rather, she combines selections from the music with interludes of baby noises, silence, and electronic distortion. In fact, this *Cinderella* is not a story ballet at all but a pantomime. In a story ballet, the story is, paradoxically, not as important as the dancing; the narrative is continually being interrupted to allow for dancing that does not advance the plot. An example of a traditional story-ballet staging would be Ashton's *Cinderella*. Here dancing is emphasized at the expense of narrative: he gives full value to the extended first-act divertissement performed by the Fairies of the Seasons and their attendants but eliminates the Prince's journey. Marin does the opposite, bypassing the Seasons and turning the Prince's journey into a high point, and one of the most delightful episodes of the evening.

Though Marin's vocabulary is ballet based, she uses ballet not so much for its formal values but metaphorically: Cinderella's transformation from kitchen drudge to princess is symbolized by her gift of toe shoes and tutu from her Fairy Godmother and her learning to dance on pointe (a concept that originated with Oleg Vinogradov's 1964 staging). She begins her first attempt at a classical variation by laboriously assuming a textbook fifth position, then rises precariously on pointe—and falls flat on her face. Marin also makes use of jitterbugging, acrobatics, modern dance, and stylized ordinary movement. Cinderella's gesture of wiping her hands on her apron in the kitchen seems to sum up her attitude of quiet resignation at her station in life, and speaks all the more eloquently when she repeats it unwittingly on her tutu as she makes her entrance at the ball.

Maguy Marin's *Cinderella* was a greater success with the public than with the press: except for the *Times*, the dance critics either condemned or ignored it. Yet the run was sold out and a return engagement has been announced for mid-May. The production seems to have had a direct emotional appeal that spoke to an audience that went beyond the specialist dance public. It is a measure of Marin's theatrical prowess that the audience was as completely taken in by her masked fairy-tale characters as Don Quixote was by the travelling puppet show: at the end, when the dancers ceremoniously remove their masks, we experience it almost as a betrayal. For ninety minutes, she has turned sophisticated New York theatergoers into quixotic innocents.

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Art

The pictures and passions of Leland Bell

by Jed Perl

The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. is home to some of the most beautiful nineteenth- and twentieth-century French paintings in America. From Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* through Matisse's *Studio, Quai St. Michel* to the room full of Bonnards, it's a place where the great transformations of French art—by which ordinary subjects are carried up to lyric heights—take place again and again. At the Phillips you can't help feeling wonderful about French art—the collection has an amazing coherence—and the curatorial staff likes to mount temporary shows that expand on the collection's essential themes. The Phillips organized the memorable "Braque: The Late Paintings" in 1982, and hosted the American side of the Bonnard retrospective of 1984. When the gallery exhibits living artists, an attempt is made to show things that Duncan and Marjorie Phillips, who built the collection that bears their name, might have liked. Two years ago there was a group of paintings by the English abstractionist Howard Hodgkin. This season's schedule includes shows of works by Elmer Bischoff, the Bay Area painter; Jacob Lawrence, who makes a patchwork quilt of black American history; and, now, the sixty-four-year-old New York painter Leland Bell.[1]

As it happens, Bell had some of his earliest experiences with great paintings at the Phillips back in the Thirties when he was a teenager living in Washington. It was also here that he encountered the work of Karl Knaths, an American painter who was a member of the pioneering American abstract artists group. Soon Bell got to know Knaths, who remains to this day the only teacher he will acknowledge. Knath's semi-Cubist compositions, with their constructions of black lines and their free planes of color, have a certain resemblance to Bell's work—though Bell is undoubtedly the superior artist. Bell's pictures, with their matte surfaces and rich colors—midnight blue, dusky purple, burnished gold—looked at home at the Phillips. His way of giving the old subjects of still life and portrait and figure composition a twentieth-century beat found echoes at every turn.

While described as a retrospective, the Bell show was by and large a survey of the past fifteen years of his career, with a handful of works on view to give a sense of where he'd been before. The earliest pieces, a group of small biomorphic abstractions done in ink and gouache on paper, dated 1942-45, contain shapes derived from Jean Arp and Paul Klee. (One is titled *Homage to Klee.*) Each bean, amoeba, and sharp-angled form is painted in flat color and surrounded by black lines. Then (as now) Bell seemed

1 "Leland Bell: A Retrospective" was on display at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. from January 24 through March 15. Its curator was Nicholas Fox Weber, who also wrote a monograph on the artist published in November by Hudson Hills (104 pages, $35).

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to distance himself from contemporary trends and take a backward or sideward glance. Though some of Bell's abstract shapes were faintly humanoid, his work of the Forties was more closely linked to the pure abstraction of the Thirties than to the New York avant-garde of the war years, when Abstract Expressionism was rising out of Surrealism and automatism. Bell's abstractions are based on a belief that painting ought to be totally clear. There are no mysterious depths, no fading edges. Bell likes everything to be unambiguously nailed down in space.

As a painter of reality—which he became at the end of the Forties—Bell still values pictorial logic over naturalistic effect. He cares about neither the mood of certain places and times of day nor the particular textures of cloth or metal or glass. He's miles away from the poetry of a painter like Fairfield Porter, who will capture with haiku-like precision the feeling we have on a clear morning after a big snowstorm in Massachusetts, or on an ordinary afternoon in downtown New York. Flickering sunlight, chaotic plays of shadow: all this is too ineffable, too subject to change for Bell. The black lines that he ran around his abstractions in the early Forties are there in much of the later work—as a way of containing and subduing reality, of turning it into *compositions*. When Bell does a self-portrait or a still life it's as if he's making an essence of everything he knows about the subject. (Maybe this is why he sometimes works on paintings for years—so that every chance impression can be modified.) The paintings place nature under a terrific pressure. Sometimes he leaves us feeling that he's pared down the motif too much; at other times he finds a way to incorporate its essential character into a design that reveals some hidden order in the world—an order built from the contrasts and correspondences of forms.

The Phillips show gave very little sense of Bell's work of the Fifties and early Sixties, which, to judge from the few examples in the show (and others I've seen in reproduction), were rather impressionistic. (I wonder if a conscious decision was made to suppress this aspect of his oeuvre.) Back then, Bell worked with overlapping strokes of color (he probably had Giacometti in mind), and the paintings had an informal demeanor they've lost as time has gone by. The best of the early figure paintings at the Phillips was *Self-Portrait at Easel* (1954), where the artist, seen in three-quarter view, stares out at us from his chair. This also happened to be the first in the series of self-portraits that made up the most coherent room in the show. You could see Bell's face, with its pop-out eyes and high dome of curly hair, changing as he went from early manhood to late middle age. In *Self-Portrait at Easel,* the strokes of blue and brown and red, running over and under one another, build to a warm and even gentle mood. Some people have always regretted Bell's abandonment of a fluid way of painting—they believe his small, bust-length self-portraits are the best things he's ever done. Still, looking back at the paintings of the Fifties now—to these self-portraits, and to the painting of three nudes reproduced in *Arts Yearbook 3* of 1959—you realize how their energy derives from a desire to get beyond the maze of overlapping strokes and locate what's absolutely essential in the motif. When the black lines come back into the work (it seems to be in the mid-Sixties, although it's hard to say, since many of the paintings have been reworked or lost), it's as if Bell has finally lassoed—conquered—an unruly world.

In the self-portraits of the late Sixties and Seventies the interwoven strokes—now darker in tone—remain, but they're overrun by a few relatively thick black lines that bring out the critical contours and turns of the form. Here the many tiny color shifts lend a sense of the texture of flesh and the movement of the muscles, a sense we don't normally expect from Bell. The black lines pull it all together, pin it down. Bell gives you the mess of nature with clarity laid on top. He'll finish off his head with a perfect little triangle of black—a memory trace of abstraction that also defines the tip of the nose. The self-portraitist is, by definition, a narcissist;

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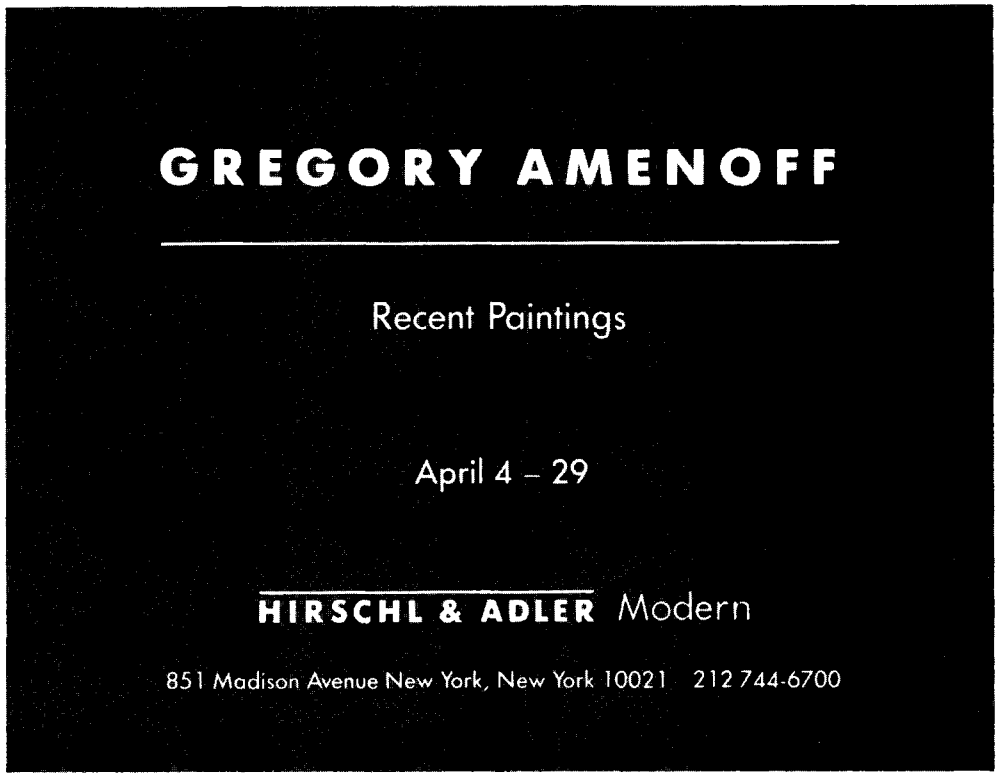
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but the painting process, which is intensely analytical, can occasionally transform self-absorption into revelation.

Bell always works in series. When he finds a subject he likes, he reworks it for years—even for decades. One canvas gives birth to another, to a geometric increase of versions. There's the thirty-year-long series of self-portraits—small scale, close to the face—and two series dealing with the figure. In one of these, inevitably vertical in format, generally called *Morning,* we see a bedroom in which a standing female nude and a man who's still under the covers gesticulate at a cat that's just killed a bird. The other series—horizontal in format—involves three people behind a table, pointing at a bird, a butterfly, or a moth. Bell has been quoted as referring to his subjects as prisons; he says he dreams of breaking out. But one rather feels he likes being imprisoned, and the figure compositions have become, over the years, a set of self-imposed limits—a form he forces himself to work through. Bell may believe that by putting his whole being into one idea forever he'll ultimately achieve release; but these variations on a couple of themes seem as the years go by to be going around in circles.

The men and women in the paintings are exceptionally stylized. Bell turns arms and faces into single-colored, abstract, Arpish forms, and then gets them to interact in frenetic domestic ballets. The broad expanses of color are often set up in stunning juxtapositions—in one of the three big figure groups there's a lovely, crazy clash of pink and orange. (Bell's color in the recent versions has definitely lightened up.) The rhythmic relations of the interlocking bodies are a joy to behold. The ordinary occasions (a cat caught killing a bird, a moth flying into a room), though, jibe rather oddly with the high-pitched gestures. It seems a hell of a lot of fuss over very little. There's a strange mismatch between the planes of flat, decorative color and the encasing black lines (all of which push so resolutely forward) and the complicated, interlocking gestures (which

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move in and out and back and forth in space).

Bell's figure groups unite the rhythms of Baroque figure compositions with the planar architecture of Cubism. They're both old-fashioned and anti-old-fashioned, a last shot at narrative painting and a deconstruction of narrative. They have the brilliance of something carried on at the farthest edge; when you're in front of them you may feel that Bell is doing the only kind of figure painting you can do in these modern times. You may feel that naturalism, whether of gesture or of drama, has been wiped out by Cubism and abstract art. But there's ultimately something unsatisfactory about an artist who invokes a psychologically charged situation and then refuses to clarify the story line or bring out the dramatic nuances. Bell's figure compositions don't really deliver the goods. He sees figure composition as all too much a matter of pure expressive form—he gives too little weight to questions of meaning. When Léger does figure groups that are as flat and brilliantly decorative as Bell's he doesn't attempt to express drama or movement—he makes his figures into benign dumb-dumbs who go great with the bright modern space.

The ripest paintings in the Phillips show—the ones that held in my mind—all seem to break with the series and come out of a unique moment, an immediate necessity. These include the two *Standing Self-Portraits* (1979 and 1980), in which we see the artist in the studio interior, surrounded by paintings and a set of drums (Bell is an amateur drummer and jazz aficionado); and a still life called *Rose and Cymbals (II)* (1979-82). The surfaces are the matte, dense ones Bell favors; but the odd intervals and juxtapositions—rose against cymbal, the head of the artist against a painting hanging on the wall—have a specificity we miss in many of his paintings. The forms really build and pulse. In the two *Standing Self-Portraits,* the artist himself becomes an explosive piece of modern sculpture—a composition of rocking convex and concave planes—and we're spun up to the face and outward, through the room. These are great paintings.

For years now Leland Bell has cut something of a figure in New York, not only as a painter, but also as a teacher and a lecturer. He's known as an odd man out, for his advocacy of unfashionable artists and causes—the later work of Derain and Rouault, and the mature style of Dufy (which he praised long before Dufy became the chic thing). I've made a conscious effort, in what I've written here, to keep this aspect of the career out of my evaluation of the paintings, but like most people who've admired Bell's work for some time, I've found his lectures very moving, and have come in the course of things to know him to some degree. As it happens my name comes up in passing in the new book about Bell by Nicholas Fox Weber, whose publication provided the occasion for the Phillips show. Bell mentions that I had asked him to give a talk at a symposium in Philadelphia on Tradition and the Artist—which he did, and it was a good talk, too.

Weber has composed his text in the form of a series of visits to the artist's studio, an approach reminiscent of a certain kind of *New Yorker* profile. This is certainly legitimate, and the extensive quotations from Bell are often very interesting—the artist can be a brilliant *poetic* talker. Weber, though, is too much in thrall to the artist, and his text has the cloying air of being written by a kid who's got his nose pressed against the window of a candy shop in which Bell happens to be the prize bonbon. Weber is a fan—which in this case means that he tells us too many little details about the artist's life and pet peeves, and can't locate them in any significant context. He wants to convey a sense of Bell's importance, but he goes haywire in his praise. While hyperbolic comparisons can be illuminating, Weber's allusions to Matisse and Frank Lloyd Wright are nothing but hot air. Weber turns Bell into a sort of cult figure who will be of interest only to a few gaga enthusiasts.

This book is an example of what might be called special-case criticism. The writer senses an injustice in the art world and sets out to right it by giving the underdog the kid-glove

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treatment. "Don't knock a guy who's down," seems to be the idea. By now it ought to be obvious that special-case criticism has betrayed many artists by leaving their work to float—or sink—in a kind of unreality of gentle or effusive appreciation. Bell is simply too important to be just patted on the back and told, "It's OK that you're not as famous as X or Y, because of course your work is perfect, anyway." I trust Bell has enough sense not to believe it. The real drama of Bell's situation is something Weber doesn't seem to understand. Bell has stood against fashion and yet managed to remain a part of things—which takes real courage. How rare he is: an idealist who's in touch with reality but won't let it destroy his dreams.

When Bell lectures today you can still feel the enthusiasm of the kid who had those first mind-expanding experiences with the paintings at the Phillips Collection almost fifty years ago. For students his energy is a sign of hope—he's an artist who influences the courses of young artists' lives. His message, moreover, transcends the advocacy of specific things—of late Derain, or Corot's figures. Despite his deep commitment to reality, Bell is a formalist. He's in the tradition of the early moderns who saw the whole history of art as existing simultaneously, in a democracy of pure form. Unlike the Greenbergians, Bell refuses to read the history of art since the Renaissance as an irreversible progress toward abstraction. For Bell the meaning of all art—a Fayum portrait, a Rembrandt, a Picasso—is encompassed by the same simple truths: by the beauty with which lines and planes and colors are weighted and set in motion and brought into harmony. Many of the weak spots in Bell's work —and in his tastes—no doubt derive from his excessive dependence on this idea of form. But I know of no one today who has expressed the moral value of pure painting with as much lyric conviction as Leland Bell. "I want the shuffles and echoes," he says in the Weber book, "and a certain mysteriousness." And again: "Am I getting that crazy thing that happens, that movement between things, that rhythm that captures the essence of reality?"

Bell came to New York before World War II; he's been a vital part of the scene here since the late Fifties. Vigorous, unsentimental, in some odd way all-American, he's inspired several generations who will never forget the first time they saw him flash a slide of a Matisse or a Dürer on the screen and started talking about "those great guys." For many of us, he's one of New York's great natural resources. The art establishment here in New York, which keeps missing the boat, has missed it again. Bell's first big show looked lovely at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. But how much more of an impact it would have had at the Whitney or Guggenheim, in the first city of contemporary art, which is where it really belonged.

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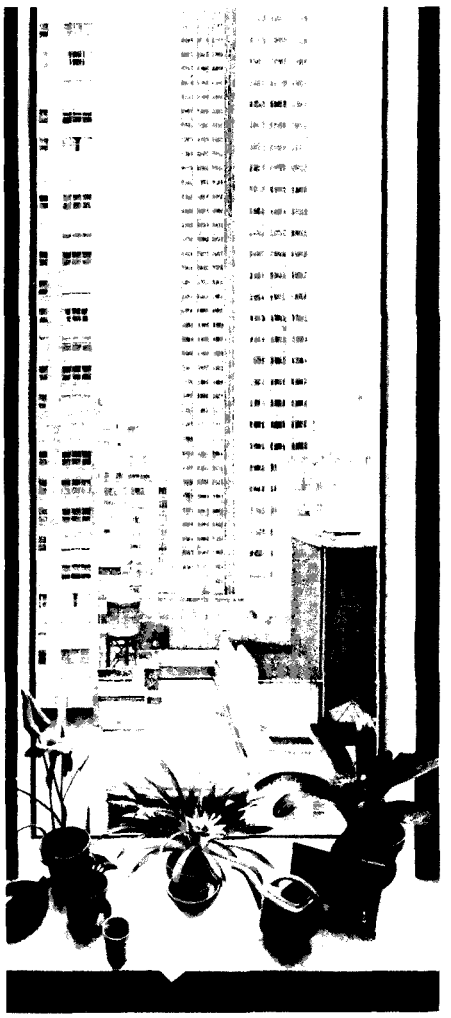

Cityscape of New York from 57th Street, 1986
Pencil on paper, 35¾ x 15¾ inches

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Walter Dexel, *Composition F-J*, 1925

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Books

The hardened reviewer

by Donald Hall

As a poet Marianne Moore is accepted, admired, acknowledged, and listed more than she is read. Surely she is as marvelous a poet as Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams but surely people read her peers more than they read her. I suppose she is more difficult: she does things in her poetry that no one did before her, even more innovative than Eliot and Pound. She is listed but overlooked because critics don't know what to say of her. A maddening phenomenon of literary reputation, when it afflicts a writer we love, is this *acceptance*—which, in italics, I will define as a form of rejection. In her lifetime she suffered not only by being accepted but by being found charming. (Late in her life she collaborated in this fate.) Although she was praised by the best, they were seldom at their best when they wrote about her. It is embarrassing to read Randall Jarrell's gush. In his introduction to her *Selected Poems,* Eliot fell back on the magic of italics: Moore, we learned, was *genuine.* (Maybe he intended a reference to "Poetry"; it is not clear.) Unwary, one may nod, How true . . . Really, Eliot might as well have assured us that she was *hickory-smoked.*

Now Patricia Willis has edited *The Complete Prose,* which is a joy to read.[1] Maybe this book will help us read the poetry. We seldom capture a difficult major author by direct assault. (It is common to speak of Moore as an armored animal. Let us try her as a fort bristling with artillery.) We are more apt to take the citadel by pulling our artillery on sledges over marshy ground to the service entrance around back. We find our way by the incomplete work, by notes, by journals, by letters, by hackwork. We understand Homer best when he nods, when he is least Homer. The Library of America's two volumes of Henry James's book reviews, or Leon Edel's edition of the short stories in twelve volumes, provide entrance to that master by way of periodical pieces written to pay the rent. In Moore's *Complete Prose,* we find much that is excellent; but like everyone else, she wrote *some* things that are perfunctory or dutiful, that leave gaps or loopholes for easy access.

It has often been noted that Moore was a master of prose; the sentiment remains true even when she writes prose. She joyrides on apothegms. She writes a thousand sentences I should like stitched on samplers: ". . . verbal felicity is the fruit of ardor, of diligence, and of refusing to be false." "The objective is architecture not demolition; grudges flower less well than gratitudes." "Rigor here is essential, and not the mortuary kind."

Of George Saintsbury she writes: "One does not correct the speech of those who make our speech correct." (Try saying it otherwise: "One does not correct the speech of those who correct our speech." "One does not correct the speech of those who

1 *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore,* edited by Patricia Willis; Viking, 816 pages, $24.95.

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speak correctly." Nothing will do except the way she did it.) Her vocabulary remains Latinate or formal, almost a mock Micawber, and finds its precision in unpredictably exact resolution. "We confess to admiring instinctiveness, concentration, and tentativeness; to realizing that gusto is not incompatible with learning, and to favoring opulence in asceticism." Ah, the genius of the preposition! When she speaks of George Moore's "intentionally conspicuous lack of sentimentality," she is the genius of the adverb as well. She masters the conflict of dictions: T. S. Eliot "seems to move troutlike through a multiplicity of foreign objects." She likes making distinctions ("Inns are not residences"), and we hear that "perquisites are of secondary importance; motive is the lively factor"; even *factor* lives, in Moore's vital scrupulosity. Of course she admires Samuel Johnson, whose notion she summarizes: ". . . if accuracy is to be habitual, one must never suffer any careless expression to escape . . . ."

After the apothegm her most frequent form is the collage, which is of course the formal signature of her poems. By this modernist device she welds verses or paragraphs together from disparate materials, not metaphors but allusions yoked by violence together. Her prose collages prepare us for Moore's "Marriage," in which her mind weds diverse particulars in a multiple shotgun wedding. Her allusive marriages, poetry or prose, resemble the *Cantos* or the boiled-down canto of *The Waste Land, petites anthologies* all. But usually Moore's units are smaller and her disparities greater—making for more wit and harder reading.

As a critic, Moore's interests are wider than I had realized. She reviews film, dance—elegant prose about Pavlova—and late in life the circus. She reviews books about everything, earning the title she once gave herself of "the hardened reviewer." When we read shorter notices of *Historic Churches of the World,* as well as *Universal Indian Sign Language of the Plains Indians of North America,* we understand: an unending curiosity supplies twigs for collage-nests.

She is an excellent critic of the poetry of her own moment, at her best from the 1920s through the 1940s. It is poignant to read her—in a day when reviews of verse are infrequent, tasteless, and ignorant—as she reviews poetry for *The Dial, Poetry, The New Republic,* Eliot's *Criterion,* and even the *Brooklyn Eagle,* not full-dress public critical acts (most of the time) but workaday notices of what is new and available. I cannot remember a poetry review that I have read in the last decade that is as good as thirty of Moore's reviews in the *Complete Prose.* She is best on Ezra Pound, with two notices of *A Draft of Thirty Cantos.* She is alert and quick-witted about Wallace Stevens, and admires his fixity or precision: "The better the artist, moreover, the more determined he will be to set down words in such a way as to admit of no interpretation of the accent but the one intended, his ultimate power appearing in a self-sufficing, willowy, firmly contrived cadence . . . ." In the 1940s, she wrote general introductions to the work of four of her eminent contemporaries. By that time she had found her way to Eliot, whom she was slower to come to than she was to Pound, Stevens, and Williams.

Although it pains her to be negative, a critic who cannot blame is no critic at all. For *The Dial,* Moore wrote a damning review of Vachel Lindsay—angry and fair, generous and impatient: She must "deplore his lack of aesthetic rigor," and gives examples by citing lines difficult to say, barbarisms of diction, gaucheries of mixed metaphor, and triumphs of illogic. "Mr. Lindsay is hampered to the point of self-destruction by his imperviousness to the needs for aesthetic self-discipline"; some of his lines even "suicidally recall Swinburne." (Artillery in an adverb again!)

Of course Lindsay is not her gang—but Moore's praise is not limited by acquaintance or by commonness of endeavor; she praises Robinson and Hardy with perspicacity. She can also make mistakes, as any useful critic must. I admire her egregious 1925 assault on John Crowe Ransom: "Unrewarding dissonances, mountebank persiflage,

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Alexander Archipenko

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mock medieval minstrelsy, and shreds of elegance disturbingly suggestive of now this, now that contemporary bard . . . ."

In her old age Moore wrote less well. An epigram that almost lives is deader than cliché, although several that I quoted earlier come from as late as 1958. In old age she became everybody's bright idea—a public-relations man at Ford, any number of periodical editors. Thus we find her writing for *Harper's Bazaar* and for *Writer's Digest,* never her best work, though some of it is poignant, as when she recalls her adolescence for *Seventeen.* Late in life she commits quotes for the jackets of poetry books, three for Daniel Hoffman alone; it is not her best form, nor is it anyone's. This dreadful practice, which sells no books, is responsible for the general notion that the lifework of most poets consists of taking in each other's washing. It is a sobering thought that, in the posthumous complete prose of the future, we will encounter more and longer Collected Blurbs. With certain poets such a gathering will run to seven volumes.

All the same, I admire the line Moore provided for John Ashbery's second book, which reads (as they say) in its entirety: "I find him prepossessing."

The best work here is practical criticism but in the course of reviewing Moore says many good things about cadence, remarking on the relationship of syntax to rhythm as Robert Frost in letters spoke about the relationship of the sentence and the line. She is, however, deaf to iambic. She proves this by misquoting Johnson's lines—partly intended to demonstrate the irrelevance of perfect meter—which end "Whose hat was in his hands." Moore writes: "With his hat in his hands"—which is not iambic, boring or otherwise. In her poetry her ear is exact and characteristic and makes use of line-structure—but her ear derives from prose.

Everyone has speculated on the sources of Marianne Moore's poetic style. Almost as much as with Walt Whitman, the individuality of her style, or its eccentricity of voice, seems to come from nowhere. Reading the *Complete Prose* suggests again certain sources

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that have been speculated over. If her ear derives more from prose than from poetry, this prose is first the complexity of the seventeenth century, essay and philosophy full of allusion and quotation; then, I think more importantly, one great modern prose writer is mentioned in the *Complete Prose* with more consistent admiration than anyone else, not a poet but a master of complexity and qualification, of query and pitch, of eccentricity and exactness: I mean Henry James.

Thinking of Henry James, we may glimpse something else about her genius. Neither Moore's poetry nor her prose brims with detachable ideas. Or her poetry becomes philosophical only when it goes soft in the 1940s, as with "In Distrust of Merits." Here I use "philosophical" not as a philosopher might use the word, but as a teacher or critic uses it who is accustomed to extract ideas from poems as a dental surgeon extracts molars. I vulgarize the word to mean the overt insistence on concepts, not their embodiment in a tissue of language that carries feeling and belief together.

At her best Moore is never a poet of extractable or translatable ideas. "Poetry is what gets lost in translation," and most bad thinking about literature depends upon translation from one set of terms to another. Moore is not in this vulgar sense philosophical, but she is serious, moral, and intelligent. This serious moral intelligence expresses itself in tone and, performing the critical act, addresses itself to style, to the minutiae of language good and bad, Stevens on the one hand and Lindsay on the other. She never mistakes ideas for the matter of poetry. Words and tone are the matter of poetry; words and tone confer and exemplify value. We may think of how Henry James shows us a character witnessing a scene and leaves it up to us to discover, uncover, recover value from the tone of this witness. Marianne Moore's is another mind so fine that no idea can violate it. Tone, scene, detail, style, syntax, pitch, even a poem's noble decorative visual shape—these convey value; these embody the untranslatable wholes of Marianne Moore's creation.

Casting away

J. M. Coetzee Foe. Viking, 157 pages, $15.95

reviewed by Donna Rifkind

After writing three books praised for their vivid originality, the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee has produced a re-invention of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in which Crusoe, his man Friday, and Defoe himself comprise three-fifths of the new book's characters. The idea is odd and bold; one expects Coetzee to turn this most familiar of adventure stories into another of his stark allegories about freedom and power, and wonders how he will do it. The author's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1982), and *Life & Times of Michael K* (1984) are all nearly as brief as novellas, and all bear a load of thematic cargo that would shipwreck many larger volumes. *Foe* is equally brief and carries the same themes, along with the burden of the required allusions to and variations upon the classic *Crusoe.* Despite the talent Coetzee has displayed in his previous novels, however, and despite the fact that he has three ready-made figures to work with, the challenge he has set for himself is nearly guaranteed to be too much for him.

The book nevertheless sets bravely off with a character in search of a story. Susan Barton, an eighteenth-century Englishwoman, has sailed to Brazil to look for her abducted daughter. She does not find the girl, so she leaves Bahia on a merchant ship bound for Lisbon; ten days out from port, the crew mutinies, kills the captain, and sets the corpse and Susan adrift in a rowboat. Susan swims to a nearby island and encounters another castaway, here called Cruso, along with his mute black servant Friday. She spends a tedious year living with the sullen, lethargic Cruso, is rescued by a merchantman heading for Bristol, sees Cruso die "of woe" on board, and settles with Friday in rude lodgings in London. Then, a third of the way through the book, Susan solicits a

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writer, Daniel Foe, to turn her adventure on the island into a work of fiction that will make her famous and earn her a fortune.

Coetzee's Foe resembles the historical Daniel Foe (who changed his name to Defoe in 1695 at the age of thirty-five) in only a few careful details: he is hopelessly in debt, is pursued by bailiffs, and had been a "visitor" to Newgate Prison. There the resemblance ends. There are no indications of the real Defoe's constant energetic moralizing (his satires on ecclesiastical intolerance were, after all, what resulted in his "visit" to Newgate); this new Foe is passive and irresponsible, spurred to write not by his conscience but by Susan's nagging. Nor does Coetzee choose to provide a sense of the originality of Defoe's artistic accomplishment. Considered to be one of the creators of the novel form, he based *Robinson Crusoe* on the story of a Scottish sailor named Alexander Selkirk; the book remains a classic because Defoe was one of the best first authors to provide imaginative—and delightful—embellishments to the facts at hand. He also told "factual" tales of fanciful characters, among them a ghost story entitled "A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal" and "autobiographies" of roguish figures (Captain Singleton, Moll Flanders). Coetzee's Foe is instead merely a hack who is temporarily diverted from money troubles by a shrewish Muse who demands that her story be told.

Neither does Coetzee's Cruso much resemble Defoe's original protagonist, who had been an industrious believer in self-improvement on his island, making tools and pots, building a canoe, domesticating goats, and harvesting crops. Coetzee's Cruso is evil-tempered and nihilistic, refusing to scrape together more than the meanest shelter and food, and working to terrace the hillsides only to ward off a killing boredom. As master of the island, he imposes no laws, and Susan's only clue that he might look toward some nobler existence is his habit of standing on a bluff in the evening like a kind of Zen master, "losing himself in the contemplation of the wastes of water and sky . . . . To me, sea and sky remained sea and sky, vacant and tedious. I had not the temperament to love such emptiness."

The book's post-island plot sinks under a similar mood of torpor and waste. Foe cannot find a way to make the island adventure interesting; he would rather write about Susan's time spent in Bahia searching for her daughter, but Susan will not allow it. He introduces her to a young woman he claims is her daughter; she denies it. She tries to teach Friday to write; he refuses. At the end, the characters are left still searching for a story in which they can operate. The book concludes with a dream sequence in which Susan imagines herself diving into a wreck where she finds Friday, who speaks in a heavenly language that does not require words.

Coetzee has attempted to distill this collection of details down to its essence, to present a plot stretched so thin that truth sticks through it like bones through flesh. Unfortunately, however, what he has given us is a cautionary tale with too much caution and not enough tale. The island, like the outpost in *Barbarians,* the camp in *Michael K,* and the desert of *In the Heart of the Country*—and carrying suggestions of Prospero's island and the Garden of Eden as well—is a moral environment that serves as a warning. In this case, the island's drowsing, late-afternoon tedium, where Susan is "lulled by the beating of the wind and the roar of the waves and the crunch of the sand under my feet" as she "falls into a waking slumber," is clearly meant to stand for the dangers of imaginative lethargy. Just as Foe's reluctance to tell Susan's story makes her fear that, unchronicled and forgotten, the story will cease to exist, so the island's stillness reminds us of the dead weight of unencumbered facts, of how only imagination and memory can redeem experiences that would otherwise be lost. Without imagination, "All shipwrecks become the same shipwreck, all castaways the same castaway." "For the danger of island life, the danger of which Cruso said never a word, was the danger of abiding sleep."

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Positioned opposite this speechlessness is a higher kind of silence, a signal of mysteries that hint of God, most of them surrounding the mute Friday, who speaks only in "gestures and actions." Coetzee presents these mysteries as an intermittent series of questions, like a catechism without responses (a technique he has used in all his previous novels): Why is Friday dumb? Why does he allow himself to remain a slave? Why does he periodically swim out to sea and scatter white flowers over the water? Does he fear Susan, or merely dislike her?

In fact, Friday, the human tale that will not tell itself, becomes the hero of the book —to the extent that a story equally reluctant to tell itself can have a hero. Friday, like Michael K and like the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians,* is a holy innocent, a "castaway" who does not want to belong to the society in which he finds himself, who has been stripped of basic defenses (in this case speech) and reduced to what Coetzee sees to be the essences of human identity: loneliness, memory, and a thin, sharp will to be free. In some ways, *Foe*'s other characters show traces of these qualities, for all their peevish, morose behavior. Susan, "a woman alone," struggles to define and attain freedom, "for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire." Cruso prefers death to the ordeal of returning to England's organized society, and the worldly Foe is trying to escape his creditors so he can write. But Friday is the most essential example of humanity here, the typical Coetzee figure: solitary, yet a subjugated creature for which others must be responsible; mute, yet expressive; temporarily bound to the earth, yet looking toward more permanent worlds.

These are large ideas for so small a book; every character, every kind of weather and mood, is made to carry a hundred meanings. The island itself is forced to represent two conflicting ideas: it signifies both the crushing, monotonous silence of a world without imagination and also the spiritual secrets of a world beyond human language for whose truths only Friday can provide oblique intimations. Coetzee's goal has been to cast away as many of a novel's external features as possible, here including incidental characters and a working plot, and then to weigh down what remains—Friday, the island—with as much meaning as he can. In his previous books he was able to do this without tipping over into a sea of preciousness, combining a spare, unwaveringly cool narration with excruciating parables about different kinds of human pain, and managing to incorporate warnings about captivity and silence as well. Usually, too, there is some reach for hope at the end; in *In the Heart of the Country,* after pages of observations about her obsessive loneliness, the woman Magda is able to say, "I am corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world." Michael K, with the determination of Kafka's Hunger Artist and Melville's Bartleby, has through passive resistance escaped the brutalizing indignities of a police state and can claim, "I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too." And *Waiting for the Barbarians* ends its methodical recounting of the various ways one can inflict torture on a human being with the image of children making a snowman.

In these books the characters were general enough to stand for any number of specific political and social victims (South African blacks being of course the most immediate), but who still retained enough independence of spirit and action to seem like real people. In this latest novel, however, Coetzee has produced characters who are all signs and symbols, and who constantly draw our attention to the powerlessness that being merely fictional, merely significant, entails. So much of the traditional workings of plot have been unmoored that the ideas which the characters represent have no foothold and collide into one another and finally slip away. We are left with the same lethargy which the island inhabitants suffered, with the same impatience for something to happen, the same sense of having been forsaken by an insufficiency of imagination. With *Foe,*

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our faith in an author who has in the past shown himself capable of both moral vision and narrative power has been—one hopes temporarily—shaken.

American writers and the British muse

Robert Weisbuch Atlantic Double-Cross. University of Chicago Press, 334 pages, $29.95

reviewed by James W. Tuttleton

The literary relationship between England and America has been a source of continuous tension since the era of colonial Puritanism. Until quite recently, nearly every American memoir, history, sermon, novel, poem, or play that came under the scrutiny of comparative English criticism tended to suffer by the comparison—if it came under English scrutiny at all. Two centuries after the original settlement of our country, the common English view was that provincial America had produced nothing of genuine importance. "The Americans have no national literature," *The British Critic* observed in 1818, "and no learned men." "In the four quarters of the globe," Sydney Smith asked in 1820, "who reads an American book?" *The Athenaeum* predicted in 1831 that "this want of originality in American literature is, we think, likely long to continue." Even as late as 1860, *The Westminster Review* remarked that "For almost every work of note which has been produced there, the mother nation can show a better counterpart." The formidable and chilling effect of English criticism on the reputation and sales of our books was an obstacle for nearly every American writer until the turn of this century. Even when an American writer produced a masterpiece, the English somehow managed to take credit. Washington Irving was excluded from Mary Russell Mitford's *Stories of American Life* (London, 1830) because "his writings are essentially European and must be content to take their station amongst the Spectators and Tatlers of the mother country."

Of course there was much to be said for the English position: the early literature of our country reflects all the limitations of a provincial society in the process of building a nation and a literature to reflect it. But few early American writers wished to grant our provincial inferiority. And whatever affection American writers may have felt for "Our Old Home," as Hawthorne called England, it is worth remembering that English criticism was not always completely disinterested: the long history of political conflict prior to 1776, the American Revolution itself, the War of 1812, the cultivation of the Confederacy by the English during the Civil War, and like political strains had an implicit effect on much British criticism. And then there were the masters of English literature themselves—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Tennyson, Arnold, Dickens, and the rest—who made it easy for the English to justify their scorn.

The American response to the manifestly superior art of English literature during most of this period took a variety of forms: gestures of conciliation, assumed indifference, feigned humility, visible anger, and exaggerated claims of superiority. There was a good deal of Yankee strutting and posturing. Melville admonished: "let America first praise mediocrity even, in her children, before she praises . . . the best excellence in the children of any other land." Such attitudes clearly express the most decisive response of Americans to the power of English literature. This response was a literary nationalism, which began before the era of the Revolution and culminated in Emerson's declaration of literary independence in "The American Scholar": "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." There was a good deal of the Westerner's swagger in this, and something of the tall tale in our praise of local mediocrity. Hence, toward the end of the nineteenth century, Henry James could famously list the elements of high civilization necessary to the writer but still absent in America:

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> No state, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot!

Patriotic Americans like Howells retorted that our democratic institutions had produced a new social order and a greater emphasis on the individual in his personal mystery and grandeur, but neither the English Victorians nor literary internationalists like James and Longfellow were likely to be convinced.

These transatlantic skirmishes have been ably dealt with in the past by several scholars and critics, notably Clarence Gohdes in *American Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (1944), Benjamin T. Spencer in *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign* (1957), and Benjamin Lease in *Anglo-American Encounters: England and the Rise of American Literature* (1982). But the recent boom in critical theory has provided new approaches for examining Anglo-American literary relations, and so it comes as a matter of some interest to see how Robert Weisbuch addresses the issue in *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson.*

Let me say at the outset that this book is one of the most impressive studies of transatlantic literary influence ever written by an American. Mr. Weisbuch has read widely and thought deeply; he has adroitly juxtaposed his English and American writers, and disclosed literary relationships where I should not have expected them. The parallels that he establishes—between Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and Dickens's *Bleak House*, between Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* and Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, between Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship* and Emerson's *Representative Men*, and between Thoreau's *Walden* and Wordsworth's nature poems—are invariably cogent and thought-provoking. If sometimes they are neither fully original nor fully convincing in the context that he provides, this is essentially a small quibble about a large and impressive investigation into the problem of literary relationships. But I have one serious reservation about the book which needs to be cleared away at once, before I turn to the most strikingly original and valuable feature of its analysis.

For all its brilliance, *Atlantic Double-Cross* is not without its longueurs in its slavish dependence on Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, cultural belatedness, and maps of misreading. Bloom is, alas, a "strong predecessor" whom Weisbuch cannot—for reasons that elude me—escape. The result is that *Atlantic Double-Cross* descends uncertainly into a dubious psychohistory, finds influence where there is no documentary evidence of it, and misreads British literature by failing to connect it to its own historical situation (for example, the increasing democratization of nineteenth-century England, manifest in the Corn Laws and the several Reform Bills).

There is no doubt, for example, that Emerson reacted negatively to Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship* and that *Representative Men* constituted a Transcendentalist democrat's response. Nevertheless, these two writers enjoyed a friendship and maintained a correspondence. To present their exchange as one of a number of cases reflecting *enmity*, which Weisbuch calls "the keynote of Anglo-American literary relations in the mid-nineteenth century," seems exaggerated. Further, is it reasonable to argue—in the absence of any extratextual evidence whatever or any allusions to the English poem—that "Song of Myself" is powerfully influenced by Wordsworth's *The Prelude*? If *not* mentioning a contemporary British writer is evidence of significant influence, literary evidence has lost its meaning for scholar-

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ship. In too many cases, it seems to me, the quality of analysis weakens when Weisbuch turns from a brilliant discussion of larger cultural phenomena to the relations between specific texts. Melville clearly read Dickens, but the evidence adduced to claim "Bartleby" as an "answer" to *Bleak House* is, after the notation of a few parallels, stretched impossibly thin.

Let me turn now to the most impressive aspect of this study—Weisbuch's analysis of the American writers' engagement with history. The chief distinction between English and American literature, according to Weisbuch, is that "the world really, securely, imposingly exists for the Englishman. It is chiefly mysterious, portable, wispy, and insecure for the American." The effect of this ontological instability on the American writer is a continuous state of insecurity that perhaps Orestes Brownson captured most clearly:

> As parvenus, we seek rather to forget than to recall our own past. We are in a position which we were not born to, which we were not brought up to, and which we feel that we may at any moment lose. We do not feel ourselves at home, or settled for life; we are ill at ease; care sits on our brow, anxiety contracts and sharpens our features.

Brownson fixed this ontological insecurity on our relationship with the past. The typical American denial of the past, the feeling of insecurity with the present, the sense of what might be called (in Henry James's term) "the imagination of disaster," is a recurrent phenomenon in American writing from Emerson and Melville through Fitzgerald and Pynchon. And there is no doubt that it reflects the impact of the dark unknown confronting the American self as it evolved in a brand-new country. If the European past was to be forgotten after the long voyage over, and if the American present had no past, some strategy for rationalizing the condition of time had to be developed by the American writer. And it is in the description of how some of our best

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Romantic writers responded to the issue of supplying a historical sense that *Atlantic Double-Cross* attains its greatest originality.

In Weisbuch's view, there are four strategies by which American writers overcame the absence of a historical past. The first he calls "stretched time," by which he means the American writer's elongation of a brief historical past. Hawthorne's creation of the sense of a remote antiquity in *The House of the Seven Gables* is but one instance: few readers are conscious that only a hundred and seventy years have elapsed since Maule's curse; it seems so much longer. If Henry James argued that "it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature," Hawthorne seems to have been saying that "it takes only a little time to produce a great deal of history." As Weisbuch remarks, "the two American centuries appear luxuriously long for the kind of history, allied to myth, that literature most cares about."

A second strategy for providing America with a usable past, one equal to England's, is the creation of an archetypal history. This seems evident in James Fenimore Cooper's "prodigious complication of time" in works like *The Last of the Mohicans*. There a remote American past is achieved through the creation of the archetypal hero Leather-Stocking, who, together with "The Great Sarpent" and others, participates in the immemorial culture of the ancient but vanishing Indian tribes. On one level Cooper exploits the past of the eighteenth-century French and Indian wars. But on another the Leather-Stocking tales "refuse a more immediate historicity," as Weisbuch observes, "for a mysterious one that yet could make claims on the facts of an American past."

The English traveller Morris Birkbeck reported in 1817 that "there is a figure of rhetoric adopted by the Americans, and much used in description; it simply consists of the use of the present indicative, instead of the future subjunctive; it is called anticipation. By its aid, what *may be* is contemplated as though it were in actual existence." This rhetorical trick, or American habit of mind, Weisbuch calls "Futurism." It is for him a third strategy for dissociating American literature from an exiguous historical past. Futurism works by attaching our literature to a future defined as the fulfillment of the implicit promise of America. It "replaces history with American democratic principles, or rather with the hoped for reality that would result from the total and inspired application of those principles." Whitman's asserting that "Today I am jetting the stuff of far more arrogant republics," and then projecting himself into the future that he has arrogantly created ("I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence"), is typically Futurist in the treatment of time. This location of the greatness of America and her literature in its goal, its destination, and its purpose, rather than in its past or present achievements, sufficiently overcomes the brevity of our history and the insignificance of our actual literary productions.

The fourth strategy Weisbuch labels "vertical time," an internalization of history in the subjective self. Emerson's claim that "all the facts of history preexist in the mind as laws," that "all history becomes subjective," and that "there is properly no history, only biography," has the effect of interiorizing history as a function of consciousness alone. The stratagem effectively disparages the significance of actual events in real past time and sanctions an indifference to them. From such a standpoint, England has nothing particularly to be proud of in its antiquity. History has really nothing to give. It is, as Emerson remarks, but a "vanishing allegory" of events already present to consciousness. Only the Timeless Now provides immediate access to the eternal. Thoreau never wants to know the news, only what is never old. Similarly, for Emily Dickinson, "The Only News I know/Is Bulletins all Day/From Immortality."

This bare outline of the ways that American writers have coped with an absence of a significant history in their literary rivalries with the English is inadequate to describe Weisbuch's sophisticated and complex readings of our literature. Nor does my account

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sufficiently characterize his treatment of the British view of history, which, as Stephen Spender has remarked, asserts that "the immensely greater part of human consciousness is crystallized in the world of the dead and that to be alive is to be an outpost of that consciousness." But what should be obvious from this contrast is that the Americans in Weisbuch's study are Romantic Idealists and their English counterparts Victorians who have lived past the transcendental strainings of their own Romantic era.

Henry James, perhaps more than anyone else, illustrates the double-crossing of American and British influences and the attempt to transcend both through a sophisticated cosmopolitanism. He once remarked that

> to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically etc.) claim our property wherever we find it.

While it is reductive to see James only through the lens of British literature, as Weisbuch does (James was, after all, powerfully influenced by the work of Zola, Flaubert, the Goncourts, Turgenev, and others), there is no doubt that the English novel constituted an important influence on him. Weisbuch makes an excellent case that James picked Hawthorne and George Eliot as his American and English models and tried to fuse them in a social fiction properly attentive to the deeper psychology of the individual. That this was a conscious intention seems evident from his 1888 letter to his brother William:

> I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am at a given moment an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America . . . and so far from being ashamed of such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized.

James's aspiration to be highly civilized reminds us that Weisbuch's subject is the aversion to civilized forms of certain American Romantics and that the tables have now been completely turned. In the twentieth century British writers, if they wish to be highly civilized, must study the American masters—Eliot and Pound, Frost and Stevens, Hemingway and Faulkner, and James himself. In art as in empire, the mother country has watched her children assert (if they do not always evince) their self-sufficiency.

Mountain mystifications

Hermann Broch The Spell. Translated by H. F. Broch de Rothermann. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 391 pages, $22.50

reviewed by Roger Kimball

The Viennese novelist Hermann Broch finished *The Spell* in January, 1936. This was some four years after he completed his monumental trilogy, *The Sleepwalkers,* and nine years before the publication of *The Death of Virgil,* the works that established and continue to sustain Broch's reputation as one of the pre-eminent literary voices of the century.

Set in the early Thirties, *The Spell* recounts events in a remote Alpine farming village over the course of nine months, from late winter to the following autumn. Into the peaceful, still largely peasant community nestled at the foot of Mount Kuppron, an exotic-looking, mustachioed stranger named Marius Ratti appears one day. A charismatic crackpot, Marius is a wanderer who comes to the village full of ideas about the importance of chastity, the sacredness of living in harmony with the earth, and the evils of city life and technology. He is also full of promises about re-opening the old gold mines in the mountain.

Obviously eccentric, if not indeed mad, Marius is greeted at first by detached curiosity and derision. But gradually he wins

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converts among the villagers; in those in whom he fails to spark romantic longing he sparks greed. Implicitly challenging the spiritual authority of old Mother Gisson, Broch's representative of traditional peasant wisdom, Marius proclaims a new order based on male dominance and a violent earth mysticism. As Marius consolidates his psychological hold on the community, his pronouncements take on an increasingly ominous ring. "We all have to hearken to the earth together," he says about halfway through the book, "then justice will be established . . . and if they are not ready for such togetherness, they must be made to accept it." In the course of establishing this "justice," Marius fuels a campaign of hate against Wetchy, the village insurance agent who is branded a city man and outsider; and he begins talking about the necessity of a blood sacrifice to restore the community's lost harmony with the earth. The book climaxes at a drunken harvest festival where Irmgard, the granddaughter of Mother Gisson who has fallen in love with Marius, offers herself up as the requisite unblemished victim to fulfill his gruesome redemptive fantasy.

This story is related in the journal of an aging, unnamed community doctor. The doctor, himself a city man who had retreated to the village some ten years earlier in the wake of a disastrously unhappy love affair, came to Mount Kuppron "for the sake of a different kind of knowledge which was to be stronger even than all oblivion." As it happens, some such "knowledge" is on pretty much everyone's mind in *The Spell.*

In a two-page commentary written in 1940 that is appended to the translation, Broch tells us that he conceived of the book as a study of "mass-psychological phenomena." Given the times, it is no surprise that the book is meant partly as an allegorical portrait of Hitler's mesmerizing rise to power. Broch chose to tell the story in the form of a journal, he says, because "a journal is the simplest and most honest means of reflecting on psychological phenomena." And "since peasants do not keep journals," he entrusted the tale to the doctor, presumably one of the few literate characters in the story. In fact, the doctor's testimony reveals the extent to which even he—a relatively skeptical, relatively urbanized onlooker—is susceptible to Marius's spell. But while there is some effort to preserve the illusion of the journal form, at least in the book's opening pages, the narrative soon dissolves into an abstract retrospective meditation far removed from the immediacy and day-to-day chronicling that we associate with a journal.

In itself, this is perhaps a minor point. But what it tokens is the total disarray of the novel as we have it. The confusion surrounding the book begins with its title. It was published in its current form in German under the title *Die Verzauberung* ("The Spell" or "The Enchantment") in 1976. In his correspondence, however, Broch usually referred to the book simply as the "Mountain Novel," sometimes as "my religious novel," and in his papers he indicated various provisional titles ranging from *The Wanderer* to *Demeter* to *The Tempter* ("Der Versucher"), the title given the book in earlier German editions of Broch's works.

But the most important thing to appreciate about the book is that Broch himself never saw fit to publish it. As soon as he completed the first draft, he set to work revising it, substantially—indeed, drastically—altering the tone and texture of what he had written. But it was just at this point in Broch's career—when he had revised little more than half the novel—that his doubts regarding the value of literary activity deepened into a skepticism so complete as to border on rejection. Scarcely a year before, in 1935, he could still exclaim that "the only meaning" of his life lay in the novel he was working on; but by 1936 he wrote in a letter that "intellectual, or poetic, or any other cognitive work has become superfluous" given the shadow cast over Europe by the rise of Hitler and Mussolini. Putting the point more generally, Broch concluded in another letter that "the contemporary world in its disintegration of values no

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longer has a place for intellectual and artistic achievements."

In Broch's view, our precarious age demands concrete ethical and political guidance, not the ambiguous speculations of art; increasingly, literature seemed to him to be an aesthetic game that might entertain or distract but that was unable to furnish either real knowledge or the "new myth" that an age of disintegrating religious values required if it was to heal itself. As Hannah Arendt put it in her classic essay on Broch, "during the last years of his life [Broch was] completely convinced of the primacy of knowledge over literature, of science over art." In 1937, he abandoned work on *The Spell,* turning instead to writing political tracts and, in time, to composing *The Death of Virgil,* his dense, lyrical paean to the death of literature.

Yet Broch returned to *The Spell* once more. Near the end of his life, living in exile and desperate for money, he acceded to his publisher's request for a novel, setting aside his political writings and work on mass psychology. But instead of simply turning over the completed manuscript of *The Spell,* he once again went to work revising it: even straitened circumstances could not induce him to publish it in its current form. He had managed to get through about five chapters of a third version of the book when he died of a heart attack in May, 1951, in New Haven, Connecticut.

The text, ably translated here by Broch's son, is based mostly on the first—and only completed—version of the novel. In chapter ten, however, Mr. Broch de Rothermann has chosen to interpolate a longish passage from the *second* version of the novel. In this passage, the doctor suddenly goes back fifteen years to recount his ill-fated love affair with a pediatrician and self-described "militant communist" named Barbara who ends up committing suicide after a plot to assassinate a political figure fails. Mr. Broch de Rothermann explains that he included this passage from the second version partly because "its descriptive sections are stylistically much more polished and rounded, and the

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insights into the doctor's personality . . . are more sharply focused" than they are in the first version, and partly because of "the central position that this story occupies in the structure of the novel."

His decision strikes one as arbitrary and ill-judged. It is true that the passage in question is stylistically superior not only to the balance of chapter ten but to the entire novel. But because it introduces such a drastically new tone, and presents the doctor in such a radically different light, it almost seems to be drawn from a different book. And appealing to the "central position" that the passage was to have in the novel seems especially odd—not to say disingenuous—since the body of which this was to be the central element is unavailable. Above all, however, the interpolated passage indicates how substantial were the revisions that Broch planned even for the second version of the novel.

Yet for all this, *The Spell* is a fascinating document—not, alas, as a novel, but as an example of what can happen when a major literary imagination suffers shipwreck on an idea that just doesn't pan out. Characters are never quite realized, the action seems contrived, themes are only half worked out or are introduced with a heavy hand: indeed, the novel never manages to come together. But in its fiercely intelligent disorder it reveals a good deal about how Broch went about the business of fabricating stories. And of course there are marvelous passages. Chief among Broch's purely literary gifts was an ability to evoke nature with great lyrical delicacy. Consider the moment in chapter ten when the doctor, in the midst of his budding love for Barbara, gazes dreamily out of the window:

> I leaned out the window of my apartment above the laboratory and looked down at the trees, their pinks and whites slowly dissolving into grayish shades while the sea of the city's roofs gently sank into the spent, smoky haze of the darkening night, the diaphanous veil of the evening appeared to me like a translucently gossamer flower, an eye crowned by the brows of angrily tempestuous clouds that edged the far-off horizon, and duskily disclosed an ivory face framed by tea-black auburn hair, gray-eyed and illuminated by an ineffably tender smile, truly seen for the first time although I already knew it so well. I gazed into this face, I could not draw away from it, and I remained leaning at the window until night set in, and the night was like an infinitely gentle and feminine hand, softly resting on the brow of the world.

That is sweetly observed. And there are other passages of equal beauty scattered throughout the book.

Unfortunately, though, such oases do little to salvage the novel. For one thing, the action of the book is incredible. Viewed abstractly, the story of Marius's conquest of the tiny village can be invested with all manner of significance. The problem is that Broch has failed to make Marius's attraction compelling. In the commentary appended to the book, Broch observes that

> it is one of the essential elements of the present era that it attempts to compensate for the decline in religious faith by an almost feverish worship of "nature," on the surface motivated by hygienic, sports-related, ecological, or other such rationalizations, though in truth its sources lie much deeper and, indeed, within the metaphysical sphere . . . . [O]ne would not be wrong to see in this constant readiness of mythic and nature-oriented tendencies to reassert themselves one of the main reasons why our present epoch is so vulnerable to mass-psychological forces.

All this may be perfectly true. But Broch does not *realize* this insight in the story of Marius and the peasants of Mount Kuppron. He has populated this version of the novel with *types,* not characters, with picturesque mouthpieces for the various ideas and "positions" he discerns in the crumbling society around him. None of his personages is endowed with sufficient specificity to be considered an individual. Indeed, just about

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everything in this book, down to the landscape and animals, is enlisted in Broch's quasi-philosophical allegory; Mount Kuppron is never just a mountain, nor is the doctor's poor dog, Trapp, ever allowed to go about his doggy life: both are heavily painted props in this passion play of demonic redemption.

And perhaps never before have so many peasants clamored so breathlessly, so articulately, so unconvincingly after the infinite. (Indeed, in some ways, "the infinite" may be considered the real hero of the book.) The chief tip-off that a character is in the process of delivering himself of profound sentiments about sex, death, and man's unutterable relation to the earth is that his speech suddenly is peppered with ellipses. For example, Marius, elaborating on his chthonic theories against matriarchy, explains that women "do not release the knowledge they have swallowed, they only release children from their wombs . . . they swallow and swallow and they forever suck . . . but the end of their time has come, they cannot listen to the earth because they are themselves in the earth . . . their time has ended, their power is over, the earth won't stand for it any longer."

And of course when it is time for Mother Gisson to die, she repairs to the forest, to the spot where her husband was shot dead years ago, to commune with the departed spirit of her granddaughter. Directing herself to the doctor and a sixteen-year-old peasant girl who, we are led to understand, is the beneficiary of Mother Gisson's spiritual mantle, this presumably uneducated peasant woman confides that

> I have learned that we need not die into our death but may live into it and that such a death is neither in vain nor senseless, and that then the bitter death itself becomes alive, and what is alive is never futile. And I have learned that I must not look at the end if I wish to see it but must instead look at the center, the center which is where the heart is . . . yes, the center is so strong that it reaches past the beginning and the end, so strong that it reaches into what is dark and that which is feared by men because they see nothing there but sheer nothingness and darkness . . . . But when the center has been allowed to grow freely, then it casts its brightness beyond all borders and to the utmost limits, then there is no difference any longer between what is past and what is to come and we are permitted to look to the other side and to those who have died, we are permitted to speak with them and they live together with us.

There is no doubt that Broch was attempting to dramatize a species of nature mysticism here. But the effect, as his biographer Ernestine Schlant has observed, was not mystical insight but an "indulgent mystification."

The chief allegorical ambition of the book is to presage the "spell" that Hitler and his National Socialist ideology had cast over Germany and Austria. But here, too, I'm afraid that the novel is unconvincing. Marius is certainly a disturbing figure. But his ranting on about man's broken relation to the simple cycles of the earth or his demand for a blood sacrifice to re-establish the cosmic order hardly makes him a stand-in for Hitler. Nor does his henchman, the dwarf Wenzel, bear a noticeable resemblance to Goebbels, despite his penchant for organizing the local youth into paramilitary squads. Nor indeed does the pathetic Wetchy family do very well as a figure for the Jews under Hitler; not every village scapegoat is the subject of a concerted ideological purge. The editor of the critical edition of Broch's works has devoted a scholarly article to tracing all the allusions to Hitler and the Nazis in the book, and one is not surprised to discover that his efforts were amply rewarded. But the truth is that by dramatizing the Hitler phenomenon in the bucolic setting of Mount Kuppron, Broch has isolated the Nazi debacle from the social, economic, military, and racial realities that made it the world-threatening eruption that it was. To draw an analogy between Marius's seduction of Mount Kuppron and Hitler's twelve-year militaristic orgy, labeling both "mass-

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psychological phenomena," is to aggrandize one and trivialize the other.

In the end, though, criticism of the book must be somewhat qualified. For what we are dealing with here is not really a "book" but a manuscript that was deliberately left unpublished by its author. At most, we should consider it an abandoned experiment. And in this sense, considered *as* an experiment, there might be some justification for publishing *The Spell,* at least for scholarly reasons. But to present it as a finished novel, in any way comparable to *The Sleepwalkers* or *The Death of Virgil,* is to deceive the public and do a profound disservice to the memory of Hermann Broch.

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Notebook

Henry-Russell Hitchcock 1903-1987

by William H. Jordy

Henry-Russell Hitchcock, who died on February 19, 1987, at the age of eighty-three, was the outstanding historian of modern architecture; for Americans particularly, he virtually established the field which he dominated for so long. Although he wrote on many other subjects—his last books, in fact, dealt with German Renaissance and rococo architecture and with Dutch brick-gabled architecture—it is as the longtime dean of the history of modern architecture that he will be remembered.

Hitchcock looked the part of his commanding professional role. He was tall, portly, dapper, with a leonine head and, in later years, a clipped beard in the manner of Freud, whom he came vaguely to resemble. Typically, he held forth in gatherings in a stentorian voice; his wisdom and a wealth of detailed information inevitably discouraged interruption. A jovian wit, a delight in gossip, and a hearty appetite for food, drink, and sociability generally enlarged his professional persona in endearing (and sometimes maddening) ways. In all his aspects, he seemed larger than life. On one occasion, I recall him sitting on an armless "loveseat," quite filling its double capacity (more by amplitude of spirit than body), and so losing himself in what he was saying while gesturing and drinking that, quite suddenly, he toppled sideways and rolled like a ball on the floor. Only momentarily ruffled, he dusted himself off, and returned to his discourse as though nothing had happened.

On first acquaintance, such an expansive personality would have seemed all ego but for the softening aspects of his geniality and his gossipy interest in how others were faring. These qualities hinted at his endless generosities to students and fellow professionals over the years, and at his service to all sorts of organizations furthering the cause of architecture. The fact that so many students and peers came quickly to call him "Russell" itself suggests an easy rapport. And finally there was the largeness—the sheer *largesse*—of what he had to give. He was a bachelor, with the bachelor's relative freedom to wander at will, and he possessed an intellect as far-ranging as his travels.

By mid-career Hitchcock seemed to have been everywhere. He travelled with great efficiency, moving from monument to monument with an incredibly sharp eye. He never carried a camera. (Others took the photographs he needed.) He looked. He remembered what he saw. And to his visual memory he added a daunting accompaniment of facts and interrelationships. His encyclopedic mind permitted him to "fill in" vast expanses of architectural knowledge which he was the first, or among the first, to explore.

As an undergraduate at Harvard, Hitchcock wrote for *Hound & Horn,* a student publication that advocated modernism in the arts. Following a short stint at Harvard's School of Design (in mid-life he actually designed a couple of renovations), he de-

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cided to pursue a doctorate in art history, although he never finished his degree. His great interest even then was in modern architecture, a subject clearly unsuitable for a Ph.D in the late 1920s. Hence the irony that so great a scholar should have lacked the customary credentials. And hence his long academic career at "colleges": Vassar briefly, then Wesleyan (which later became a "university") and Smith, from 1927 to 1961 all told. He held numerous visiting professorships at major universities, especially in the Sixties, and was awarded several honorary degrees. His academic career culminated in a full-fledged appointment in 1968 at New York University's graduate Institute of Fine Arts.

Hitchcock's career as a historian and critic of modern architecture effectively began with his work as a journalist for the *Architectural Record* in the late 1920s, and with his first book, *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* (1929). For a scholar-critic of twenty-six, *Modern Architecture* was an extraordinary achievement. It started off with a breathtaking survey of Western European and American architecture from 1750 to around 1875. Inverting Spengler, Hitchcock examined the disintegration of architecture in the nineteenth century (the result of certain excesses of romanticism). He then outlined a "reintegration" in two phases: the first associated with a group of architects at work in what he called the "New Tradition," from roughly 1875 to 1920; the second with the "New Pioneers" of the Twenties. As Hitchcock explained, "New Tradition" architects—like H. H. Richardson in America, Josef Hoffmann in Austria, Peter Behrens in Germany, Auguste Perret in France, H. P. Berlage in the Netherlands—reasserted the importance of straightforward building by drastically simplifying the restless mass and elevations of their predecessors. The "New Pioneers"—Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, J. J. P. Oud, among others—completed the reform, but in such radical terms as to usher in a revolutionary new style. Its name? Hitchcock shuffled the possibilities: "Oud's claim that the new manner is 'pure' architecture, or Lönberg-Holm's that it is a 'time-space' architecture, even van Doesberg's that it is 'elementarist,' have some slight meaning.... However, it is enough to call the architecture of the New Pioneers the international style . . . ."

These ideas were given a fuller exposition in 1932 in *The International Style,* a book that was to become a vastly important document in the history of modern American architecture. Hitchcock's co-author was Philip Johnson, with whom he had organized, a year before, the first major architectural exhibition at the fledgling Museum of Modern Art in New York. Derived in part from this exhibition (entitled "Modern Architecture"), *The International Style* proclaimed the principles of "a modern style, as original, as consistent, as logical, as widely distributed as any in the past," as Alfred Barr described it in the book's preface. The style itself featured simple volumes in elemental shapes, with open planning; an organizing principle of regular rhythms rather than compositional symmetries; and unadorned (even untextured) walls, made distinct only by the scale and rhythm of their openings.

The serious nature of International Style modern, with its "pure" and "elementarist" aspects, stood in opposition to the contemporary American varieties of "moderne," like "Art Deco" and "streamlined," both oriented toward consumption and based on superficial ornament. Against provincial notions of modernity, *The International Style* posited cosmopolitan reform. The reform was, moreover, predominantly aesthetic. True, a short final chapter of the book discussed the importance of housing in European modernism. But the social, political, and functional forces that substantially justified modern architecture to Europeans got short shrift in *The International Style.* Its visual qualities were featured. For Hitchcock and Johnson, modern European architecture was just (or mostly) that—a *style*: fully developed and ready for export to those Americans who seriously cared about what the future of architecture was bound to become.

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Already in his first two books Hitchcock displayed the qualities that would characterize all his work. He brought a dense knowledge of the past to bear on current developments. He gave a compelling structure to wide-ranging subjects, clarifying their significance without denying their complexity. And he dismissed or devalued what was ephemeral and fashionable in the history of architecture in order to stress essential architectural values. These qualities gave his work an unparalleled authority in the field of architectural history, an authority intensified by the weightiness of his conclusions and the resiliency of his elaborate—and often witty—prose style.

Hitchcock's emphasis was formalistic. For this he has been criticized in recent years, when art history is less formalistically inclined than it tended to be in Hitchcock's day. But the criticism is somewhat unfair, insofar as his visual analysis was not merely descriptive but addressed itself to what was of consequence *architecturally.* Moreover, acute biographical, social, and cultural commentary is copious (if allusive) in his writing. Even so, it is the act of perceptive looking that prevails.

The venturesome quality of his mind made his work congenial to museum exhibitions. For example, *The Architecture of H. H. Richardson and His Times* (1936) and *In the Nature of Materials: The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright, 1887-1941* (1942) served as the basis for exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art. It is a measure of Hitchcock's vitality as a scholar that he should have written the first large-scale studies of such major American architects when their work was hardly known. Like many of his books, both are still in print decades after their original publication and remain "standard" treatments of their subjects. *Modern Architecture in England* (1936), *Latin-American Architecture Since 1945* (1955), *Gaudí* (1957), two catalogues in the "Built in America" series covering recent architectural developments —these are other books that coincided with exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art. His *Rhode Island Architecture* (1939), for an exhibition at the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, was an early museum inquiry into regional architecture. It discussed mills and mill housing, although such buildings were mostly disregarded by scholars at the time. It featured, too, the now famous late nineteenth-century "shingle style" summer houses of Newport, which Hitchcock was astute enough to have spotted for his very first book and to which he had returned in his account of Richardson's work. His *Painting Toward Architecture* (1948) used the Miller Company Collection of Abstract Art for another innovative exhibition, on the influence of modern painting on modern architecture.

Hitchcock was always turning over new ground. He began work on English Victorian architecture as early as 1944, at a time when there was little taste for the stuff. *Early Victorian Architecture in Britain* (1954) was to have been followed by a second volume, but this was subsumed instead in his remarkable *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1958), a volume in the Pelican series on the history of art. The historical survey in Hitchcock's first book reappeared here, but on a much larger scale: the labyrinth of events was now more intricately drawn and the allusions to building were now so dense that only with re-reading and a personal experience of the buildings under discussion could one hope to take in the book's full message. Finally, in Hitchcock's last years, there was the abrupt shift to the studies of German and Netherlandish Renaissance and rococo architecture. All the while he published articles on the most varied of architectural topics (the best of which should now be anthologized).

Hitchcock was himself a New Pioneer. He scouted virgin territory, tilled a good portion of what he found, and left much that he had staked out to those who followed him, lured to his frontiers by what he showed them and by his infectious enthusiasm for what he had discovered.

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Letters

Mark Morris Superstar

To the Editors:
I am writing you because I was disturbed by Eva Resnikova's article on Mark Morris in the January, 1987 issue of *The New Criterion*. The most upsetting thing in it is Resnikova's attack on Mark Morris's sexuality that seems to come out of nowhere. What are the "apparent female sexual characteristics" she attributes to him? What does she mean by "effeminate" as applied to Morris? These are charged terms to throw around in such a declamatory manner—and I feel that this kind of attack by innuendo is a dirty weapon for a dance critic to use.

But I miss any real descriptive support for any of the points she makes. She cites one moment in Morris's *Marble Halls,* a fall at the end of the second-movement adagio which she sees as a pratfall. She doesn't explain what it was about the motion itself, or the performance of it, or the context of the dance, that led her to interpret this moment as funny. She simply declares it was such a moment. Then, from this one willful citation, she spins out a theory about Morris's intentionally limited dance language, and his possible motives for limiting himself. She never acknowledges the subjectivity of her own seeing, which is something I think any halfway decent dance critic must acknowledge, given the general unavailability of dance texts to refer back to.

I don't mind Resnikova's opinions—I think a vital discussion of the pros and cons of Mark Morris would be very good for the dance world. I mind her arch and inexplicably vindictive tone. I mind it more because she has partly obscured it with a veneer of open-minded rationality. I hope *The New Criterion* can do better by dance.

Elizabeth Kendall
New York City

To the Editors:
I am writing to object to certain aspects of your recent article on Mark Morris. I have been the manager of Mr. Morris and the Dance Group for over two years and have not (until today) ever contacted any publication or journalist either to solicit attention or to protest that attention which has been paid. However, I am truly angry.

Two of the problems I have are professional and methodological. First, this article was never independently fact-checked. All "facts" and "quotes," and even many of Miss Resnikova's descriptive modifiers, were obviously culled from other people's interviews and articles. This is a bad practice, because *The New Criterion* then perpetuates past mistakes and prints factual errors, something a monthly publication should and could easily avoid.

Second, this article purports to be a critical overview of Mark Morris's work and career. It is curious, however, that attention focuses on only his most recent performances. And it raises the question for me: Has your writer seen anything of Mr. Morris's work other than that which was exhibited this fall? Perhaps my doubts are unfounded and unfair, and if so I apologize. Perhaps Miss Resnikova is quite familiar with Mr. Morris's work and the sizable repertory which has been attracting all this attention. But I'm

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puzzled and see no harm in asking, "What have you seen, Miss Resnikova?"

My last and most serious objection is to one sentence on page sixty. There one reads, "He [Morris] is, however, effeminate to a degree difficult to stomach even for a veteran dancegoer largely inured to this *déformation professionelle.*" What are we to make of this formulation? I dance, therefore I am (queer)? Dancer=Homo—sum total revulsion? Surely you would agree that fag-bashing has no place in one of our cultural journals. Why is it in *The New Criterion*? (I am, however, glad to hear that Miss Resnikova has, through years of intrepid dancegoing, steeled herself against the ordinary, garden-variety homosexual, and only feels herself in a weakened state when confronted by such a flamboyant faggot as Mr. Morris.)

Barry Alterman
General Manager, Mark Morris Dance Group
New York City

To the Editors:

I wish to protest the publication of Eva Resnikova's essay entitled "Mark Morris Superstar" in which the author has built a negative case against the choreographer with innuendo and specious logic that discredit *The New Criterion.*

Her attacks on Mark Morris's effeminacy and homosexuality are as distasteful as they are irrelevant to his work and betray her objective as political rather than aesthetic, or so it would appear.

Miss Resnikova condemns Morris with unsupported implications such as "he claims to revere Balanchine." What does Miss Resnikova know about Mark Morris's sincerity or lack of it? She dismisses his *professional* qualities—"Morris's strong points as a dancer are innate . . . ." What does Miss Resnikova know about Mr. Morris's natural or professionally learned abilities, or is it just that all queens have rhythm? She also says, for example, "The moments of real dance interest in the predominantly mime pieces are rare." One could assume that a piece that was "predominantly mime" would have rare moments of any kind of dancing, "real" or otherwise.

Miss Resnikova's most befuddled insult of Morris's talent is her statement that his dances are inexpressive because he has "sacrificed a powerful expressive resource [that is: the traditional danseur-ballerina relationship found in classical ballet] in order to make a political statement." Were one to follow this logic, would one conclude that Fokine's solo for Anna Pavlova in "The Dying Swan" is both inexpressive and political, or that the dancing that Balanchine created for Orpheus and the Dark Angel was less expressive than that which he created for Orpheus and Eurydice? In both of my examples, as in Morris's work, sexuality is simply not the issue, and Resnikova's statement that "eloquence of any language, verbal or visual" increases according to its ability to make *sexual* distinctions reveals an incoherent critical judgment.

Finally, when the time comes that Eva Resnikova approves of a choreographer's work will we assume that she too is in an "unwitting collusion" with the object of her approval? Her accusation that Balanchine's "self-appointed apostles may have allowed despair to color their perceptions" is perfectly presumptuous.

The only example she gives of such erring judgment is Arlene Croce of *The New Yorker.* Miss Resnikova's patronizing attitude toward Miss Croce is embarrassing. Why would any critic, particularly Miss Croce, choose Mark Morris as a gifted choreographer over the scores of other available candidates? What evidence is there that Miss Croce's opinion of Mark Morris is any more suspect than any other opinion she holds? I believe there is clear evidence that Miss Croce's interest in Mark Morris is supported by reasoned and distinguished arguments of a validity totally lacking in Miss Resnikova's conclusions. We can believe it is Miss Croce's intelligence that forms her taste; we must assume it is lack of experience that deforms Miss Resnikova's.

Charles France
American Ballet Theatre
New York City

To the Editors:

Why in the world do you publish Eva Resnikova's ill-informed and half-baked ideas on dance? Resnikova offers scanty evidence to back up her contention that Mark Morris has been overpraised; her argument is all in her tone, which

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is one of omniscience, with liberally scattered innuendos all suggesting that there's something hollow in the things Morris's admirers say about him and that, furthermore, we all know it. She reports me, for instance, as "quietly demoting" him from "guide to the future" to "choreographer of the year." I fail to see how the term "Choreographer of the Year," which I used as the title of a year-end summation of Morris's activity in 1986, constitutes a demotion; anyone who read my piece knows that my esteem for his gifts is as great as it ever was.

Arlene Croce
Brooklyn, NY

Eva Resnikova replies:

It is immensely flattering for a critic to be the focus of so much attention from her colleagues and others devoted to the art of the dance, even if this attention takes the form of an attack based on a seemingly willful misreading of what was written, and even if there is a telltale sameness to the issues raised in letter after letter.

Miss Kendall's incomprehension is so blatant as to appear artless. She writes, quoting me:

> What are the "apparent female sexual characteristics" she attributes to him?

Here is what I wrote:

> Morris is unfailingly described as androgynous: a puzzling locution, since he does not exhibit any apparent female sexual characteristics—and we've seen all of him.

Herself a writer on dance, Miss Kendall imputes my critical method:

> She never acknowledges the subjectivity of her own seeing, which is something I think any halfway decent dance critic must acknowledge . . . .

But everyone's perceptions are subjective. Surely the reader assumes this, and the critic need not "acknowledge" it every time he ventures an opinion. (As for the slur on my decency as a dance critic, I'll turn the other cheek.)

Mr. Alterman's letter betrays a similar naïveté. He would no doubt be surprised to learn that quoting from "other people's interviews" is considered good scholarship, and that "fact-checking" consists precisely in verifying the accuracy of quotations by checking them against the published sources from which they were "culled." If Mr. Alterman feels that Mark Morris is consistently misquoted by the press, he should direct his letters of protest to the interviewers in question; or, as general manager of the Mark Morris Dance Group, he could stop the spread of misinformation at its source by forbidding the loquacious Morris from granting interviews at all. As for Mr. Alterman's second objection, the opening paragraph of my review makes it clear that my subject is works by Morris presented last autumn in New York; therefore it should not be "curious" that I focused on them.

Mr. France lacks Miss Kendall's artlessness but misquotes me just as shamelessly (perhaps they both should have had Mr. Alterman "fact-check" their letters against my article). Here is what I wrote:

> The deliberate restriction of Morris's language is partly an anti-elitist—read anti-ballet—bias that has a time-honored place in the history of modern dance. In Morris's case, though, the rejection of ballet has an added dimension: one of the reasons he turned to modern dance, he has said, was that he "got tired of pretending to be a straight guy in love with a ballerina." In his own works Morris treats men and women as if they were interchangeable. Since any language, verbal or visual, increases in eloquence according to its ability to make distinctions, Morris has sacrificed a powerful expressive resource in order to make a political statement.

Mr. France puts into my mouth his own words: that the expressive resource Morris has sacrificed is "the traditional danseur-ballerina relationship found in classical ballet." But nowhere did I write this: I clearly state that this expressive resource is the simple *distinction* between male and female. He then writes, purporting to quote me: "'eloquence of any language, verbal or visual' increases according to its ability to make *sexual* distinctions." The phrase he puts in quotation marks is not a quote, and the phrase he does not put in

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quotation marks is a quote, with his addition of the word "*sexual*" (his italics). From this rickety rampart of misquotation and misattribution Mr. France attempts to mount his muddled attack. Of course the dance of Orpheus and the Dark Angel is not intrinsically less expressive than that of Orpheus and Eurydice. But if Balanchine had created the roles of Orpheus and the Dark Angel and Eurydice without regard to gender, then, yes, I stand by my argument that this would have diminished the eloquence of the choreographer's language.

Finally, I am accused of attacking Morris because of his homosexuality. I refer to Morris's homosexuality twice in my article, both times merely reporting his own assertions: his quote about not wanting to pretend to be "a straight guy in love with a ballerina" (interview with Tobi Tobias, *Dance Magazine,* December, 1984) and my paraphrase of his discussion of homophobia in Spain, which reads: "After high school he journeyed to Madrid to continue his studies of Spanish dance but found the homophobia there intolerable." For the record, here is the exact quote:

> You see, I was just coming out then, and Spain is incredibly homophobic. I mean, the night life is highly clandestine, although the gay community in Madrid was very supportive. There weren't any gay bars there. But there were regular meeting houses for everyone, and then, after a certain hour, it was known that they turned into gay bars. The homophobic stuff really got to me. I mean, you could get arrested just for looking too flamboyant. Well, I wasn't going to pass because I don't believe in that. [Interview with John Gruen, *Dance Magazine,* September, 1986]

I fail to see how either reference could be construed as an attack, since I attached no value judgment to them.

When, a few paragraphs later, following a discussion of the unusual amount of critical attention that has focused on Morris's physical appearance, I refer to what I characterize as his "effeminacy" (Morris and Mr. Alterman prefer the code word "flamboyant," but it comes to the same thing), I am making an aesthetic judgment concerning an element of Morris's self-presentation as a performer on the stage—one, moreover, that he flaunts; I am not making a moral judgment. Nowhere do I equate, or even link, homosexuality and effeminacy. This conflation is a false issue that has been introduced into the discussion by the writers of these letters.

Mr. France contends that my "attack" on Morris's effeminacy is "irrelevant to his work." While there are many professions in which effeminacy would indeed be irrelevant, dancing is not one of them. It is the critic's duty to point out any aspect of a performing artist's stage persona that affects what the audience sees; it is the critic's right to offer his opinion of it. I'm sorry if Mr. France found my discussion "distasteful." But as for his claim that my objective was "political rather than aesthetic," it seems to me that the reverse is true: that critics who refuse to address such "distasteful" issues do so on political grounds. As for Miss Kendall's affectation of ignorance concerning Morris's effeminacy, either she is being very disingenuous or very ingenuous; if the latter, she needs a vacation from the dance world to help her regain her perspective.

It is no accident that Mr. France ends his letter with an invidious comparison between what he perceives to be my talents as a dance critic and those of Arlene Croce. The real issue of this campaign was never my unexpressed views on Morris's homosexuality or my expressed ones on his effeminacy, but rather the infallibility of Arlene Croce's opinions and my temerity in invoking her name in a context other than that of unmitigated adulation. Mr. France complains of what he feels to be my "patronizing attitude" toward Miss Croce, which he says is "embarrassing." Embarrassing to whom? Not, apparently, to Miss Croce, whose letter betrays annoyance and anger, but not embarrassment. And anyway—speaking of politics—why does Mr. France, the assistant to the artistic director of American Ballet Theatre, feel compelled to come to the defense of one of our most influential dance critics? His letter is on ABT letterhead: are we then to assume that it represents the corporate view? Or did he appropriate the stationery merely because he hoped it would add weight to his argument? Furthermore, where was the media watch when Miss Croce herself made the truly homophobic statement in

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The New Yorker that "*Romeo and Juliet* may be the only ballet in standard repertory that homosexuals can identify with emotionally without distortion," with its obnoxious presumption that homosexuality per se indicates a particular emotional response—quite apart from the content of that response ("morbid romanticism," in her view)?

In her regrettably brief letter, Miss Croce complains that I offer "scanty evidence" to back up my "contention" that Morris has been "overpraised." But Morris's extraordinary critical reception is common knowledge, not an accusation in need of proof. Miss Croce herself played a starring role in it. Surely she cannot be unaware that her January, 1984 monograph on Morris was considered an event in itself, and her "guide to the future" pronouncement probably the most widely quoted of all critical remarks on this fledgling choreographer. Here are Miss Croce's own words:

> He's the clearest illustration we have, at the moment, of the principle of succession and how it works in dance: each new master assimilates the past in all its variety and becomes our guide to the future.

Miss Croce's review is the only one that Tobi Tobias, in her interview with Morris in *Dance Magazine,* felt the need to cite as her "evidence" of Morris's extraordinary critical acclaim, which Tobias later characterizes as "adulation":

> His reviews were a press agent's dream. The *New Yorker* critic Arlene Croce, whose taste is highly selective, devoted an entire article to anatomizing his accomplishment.

John Gruen, in his *Dance Magazine* interview, wrote, "By 1984 . . . dance critics began to proclaim him something of a choreographic genius," and then cites Miss Croce's "guide to the future" remark (after identifying her simply as "specialist on the Balanchine canon"). Thomas Conners, in the January, 1986 *Vanity Fair,* wrote of Morris:

> He's earned the praise and respect of virtually the entire critical establishment. In 1984, while Morris was relatively unknown, dance doyenne Arlene Croce anointed him with a lengthy profile in *The New Yorker.*

William Harris, in the November, 1984 Next Wave Festival program booklet, wrote:

> Young choreographers are usually greeted in the press with polite encouragement, not accolades. Except Mark Morris. Since his first concert . . . the kudos haven't [*sic*] stopped pouring in . . . . Even *The New Yorker* groped for superlatives . . . .

We even have the bemused testimony of the subject of all this attention himself. In an article by Charles Siebert in the November, 1986 Next Wave Festival program booklet, Morris describes his own reaction to Miss Croce's unwonted attentions:

> The first *New Yorker* review by Arlene Croce came out the day I got on to the plane back to Seattle. I was really surprised, because she will very often take three or four choreographers of one period and say that they do shit. So I thought I'd be in with some others and she'd say it was cute but forget about it. Then I read this whole article about me, and it makes me sit back and say, "*Hmmm,* she only writes about Balanchine. I don't *feel* any brighter."

David Vaughan, a welcome clear-eyed voice of intelligence, leads off his "Conversation with Mark Morris" in the Summer, 1986 issue of *Ballet Review* by referring to what he calls "the 'hats off, gentlemen, a genius' syndrome." Vaughan, who obviously admires Morris, makes the excellent point that excessive praise of a young choreographer can ultimately do more harm than good because it essentially deprives him of the right to fail:

> The scarcity of choreographic talent, particularly in ballet, is such that there is a tendency to rush to enthrone anyone who shows any at all . . . . One is, therefore, a little wary of overestimating the achievements and the promise of so recent an arrival on the scene as Mark Morris, both for his sake and for our own.

Enough evidence? But perhaps Miss Croce feels that Morris's talents are so great that no amount of praise can be construed as "overpraising."

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As for Miss Croce's protest that her title "Choreographer of the Year" was not intended to indicate anything other than that her article was a year-end summation, I can only accept her explanation. Since she had earlier proclaimed Morris choreographer of the future, I interpreted the temporal shift to choreographer of the year as a subtle put-down in response to the critical overkill. And a line like "Mark Morris is still an amazing young man, and he was all there in Brooklyn," with which she ends the lead paragraph of her review, felt to me a few degrees cooler than her earlier pronouncements on mastery and posterity.

Miss Croce accuses me of innuendo; but she herself is a master of the derogatory feint. Look at the opening and closing sentences of her letter. "Why in the world do you publish Eva Resnikova's ill-informed and half-baked opinions on dance?" Obviously an editor publishes a writer because he believes that writer to have merit. What Miss Croce is really saying is that the editor of *The New Criterion* doesn't know enough to realize that I don't know what I'm talking about. "Anyone who read my piece knows that my esteem for his gifts is as great as it ever was." Clearly I read the piece, and yet I didn't "know" this. What Miss Croce really means is that anyone who could read her piece and not conclude that her esteem was as great as it ever was is an idiot. She has every right to believe these things; I only wish that she would come right out and say what she means.

Miss Croce also speaks of "tone." Every writer, Miss Croce included, has a characteristic tone. She interprets mine as one of "omniscience"; I prefer to think of it as outspokenness. Miss Croce herself used to be more outspoken (she also used to have wittier titles), but her tone in the last few years has, it seems to me, more and more been one of hedging. (Her Morris monograph was striking precisely because of its uncharacteristic effusiveness.) Lately this hedging has taken the extreme form of declining all comment. Miss Croce even joked about it at a recent panel discussion on dance criticism sponsored by the New York City Ballet Guild:

> Well, I suppose I'm a lucky critic in that I don't have to write about anything that doesn't interest me. And as time passes I take more and more advantage of that. [General laughter from the audience.]

It's no secret that in the last year Miss Croce's byline has appeared in *The New Yorker* only a half-dozen times. Evidently the recently retired editor either considered Miss Croce to be uniquely irreplaceable or did not consider dance to be as important as film, theater, or music, since none of these performing-arts slots has been allowed to go uncovered for such an extended period.

It is sad that one of the few forums for serious discussion of dance is being so underutilized, especially when there is such passionate feeling among members of the dance community, and so many people eager to express it, as evidenced by the dozen letters received in response to my article, several of them from fellow critics with no regular outlet for airing their views. Miss Croce herself has helped to nurture many younger critics over the years. Since we know that the present editor of *The New Yorker* has a high regard for dance, perhaps Miss Croce might urge him to consider employing some of them to write about the many things that lately don't seem to interest her.

Religion and the intellectuals

To the Editors:

I just finished reading Hilton Kramer's piece on Richard Gilman's true confessions (February, 1987) and was especially interested in Mr. Kramer's faulting most recent books of this genre for their superficial perceptions. What surprised me, however, was his neglecting to connect the trendy involvement with religion on the part of some of the intellectuals of that period with the demise of the Trotskyist movement and their final and total abandonment of the Marxist construct.

Among the believers who couldn't function without a tidy ideology, some tucked themselves into the confession box and others into the Orgone box (I'm thinking especially of Isaac Rosenfeld who became a militant Reichian). Also, it wasn't T. S. Eliot who brought Simone Weil to the attention of Our Crowd; it was Dwight MacDonald in *Politics*. In February

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1945, he published her "Reflections on War" and in December 1946, her essay called "Factory Work."

Other times, other perspectives: a young woman who read some Weil last year referred to her as a self-hating Jew who was a clinical case of anorexia nervosa.

As a devoted reader of *The New Criterion* since its inception, I have occasional quarrels with it, but my differences don't interfere with my thinking that you're doing a terrific job.

Helene MacLean
Brooklyn, NY

Hilton Kramer replies:
Mrs. MacLean is certainly correct in citing *Politics* as the publication that introduced Simone Weil's *political* writings to American intellectuals. But I was also correct in pointing out that it was T. S. Eliot who introduced those same readers to Weil's *religious* writings.

Thomas Bernhard

To the Editors:
I read Amity Shlaes's article on Thomas Bernhard ("Thomas Bernhard and the German Literary Scene," January, 1987) with interest. Although I agree with her on several points, I am not sure that admiration for this Austrian writer is less justified because of his inextricability from the South German socio-political milieu.

Bernhard's notably Austrian world view accounts not only for the overriding themes in his work but also for his particular wit—the poignant black comedy of self-mockery and that peculiarly Viennese cantankerousness known to natives as *das Schimpfen*. When Bernhard debunks Austria's image as the happy land of waltzes, Lippizaner stallions, and boys' choruses, it is hardly intended as a private joke. Rather, it has real relevance to anyone who cares to know something about East Central Europe.

Like Kafka before him, Bernhard chronicles the harsh, immutable realities of Austrian life. He depicts the provincial mentality of its Alpine people: remote, inflexible, distrustful, even traitorous. (In this light, Bernhard's tendency to make himself the subject of his work—his self-obsession and endless monologizing—is part of his attempt to achieve an intimate character study in an atmosphere where the individual lives in brutal isolation.) Further, Bernhard reveals the cynicism underlying Austrian government policies, which relentlessly pursue a spiritual and socio-economic leveling, even as they exploit high culture.

Certainly Bernhard's ubiquitous castigation of the second Austrian republic (he equates republican Austria with National Socialist Austria) is hardly a responsible political position. But then, politics is not art; and here, unfortunately, Bernhard follows in the footsteps of many an "apolitical" German writer looking down from on high into the gutter of civic affairs.

In a broader sense, Bernhard is representative of those postwar artists and writers who, carrying the weight of centuries of cultural baggage, cannot seem to move forward. In this respect, the premiere of Bernhard's *Ritter, Dene, Voss* at the 1986 Salzburg Festival was a fitting partner to the premiere of Penderecki's opera *Die Schwarze Maske*. Both works comment upon European cultural decay.

In short, there is a reason that most of Thomas Bernhard's characters are so crotchety and useless—when not quite mad. They are a dying breed: cultured—often propertied—individualists who painfully see themselves as the last true devotees of an artistic tradition.

Dana Mack Prinz
Luxembourg

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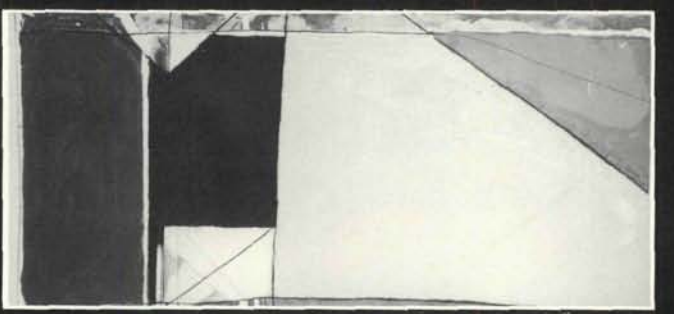

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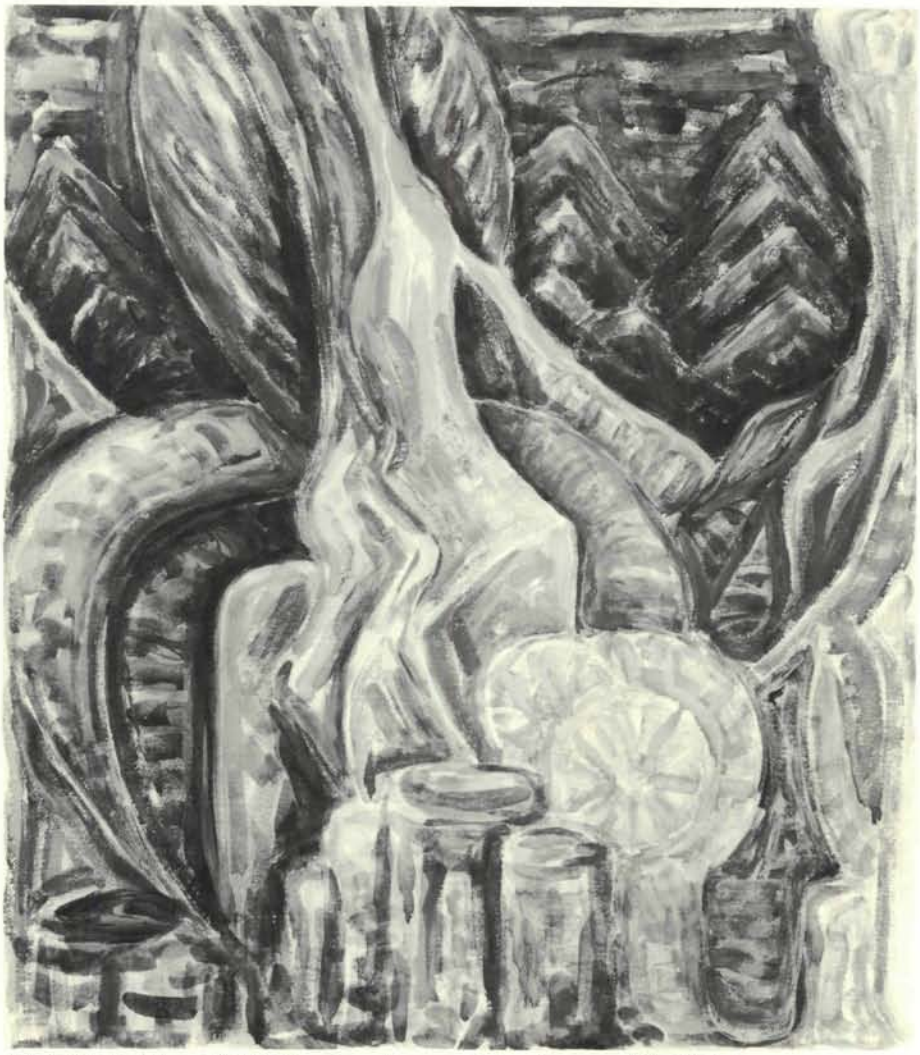

Study for "Month of February" (?), 1987. Gouache, egg tempera and watercolor on paper, 35¼ × 30¼ inches

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